



Ní Chonchúir, Nuala. *Mother America*. Dublin: New Island, 2012.

In order to describe the specific language she applied when writing short-stories, Virginia Woolf used the term “little language”, one that would echo “the old and humble common voice singing out of doors.” In the essay “Craftsmanship” Woolf went as far as to state that words “like us to think and like us to feel, before we use them; but they also like us to pause; to become unconscious. Our unconsciousness is their privacy; our darkness is their light” (*apud* Kemp VII). This assertion draws a parallel between the economical but revealing language of the short story and the psychological state of mind of its characters. The importance given to language and the faith in its power to describe the psychological and geographical states of the mind is what characterizes the Irish poet, novelist and short fiction writer, Nuala Ní Chonchúir’s latest collection, *Mother America*.

Faithful to the ordinary language of contemporary Ireland, Ní Chonchúir’s characters express their repressed desires, their longings, frustrations and hopes. From the nineteen short stories of the collection, seventeen are first-person narrators. These narrators are women who have to carry the full burden of a failed marriage and the frustration of not being able to excel in their daily activities as mothers, professionals and lovers. *Mother America* is not simply a feminist book; rather, it presents the contemporary distresses of the modern woman, coming to grips with betrayal, illusion, intimacy and love. However, at the same time the author exposes the modern distresses of women, she also deals with themes that are precious to universal literature such as history, religion, aging and familial bonds. The importance of place is also heightened in the stories: they are usually set in Ireland, but there are several that take place in both European (Paris, Rome) and American (New York, Boston) cities. Even when set in different locations, the stories always depict Irish immigrants or travelers trying to find their identity – be they mother, son, lover or artist.

The first story of *Mother Ireland*, “Peach”, which received the Jane Geske Award and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in the United States, is faithful to Cortazar’s idea that a short story is similar to a knock-out. Starting with the unsettling sentence “There was a pregnant woman getting drunk in the back lounge” (1), the narrator, Dominic, tells of his relationship with Maud, a woman whose son is taken away from her. Exploring the depths of human loneliness, the narrators of “The Egg Pyramid” and “Letters” describe, respectively, a woman whose sister had an affair with her husband, and an old lady who is left alone by her son in New York and eventually receives his

letter. The command of language is so powerful that Ní Chonchúir makes utterly different characters, such as an old lady, a divorced man and a betrayed woman, appear not only credible but fully alive to the reader. Also to be noted is the delicate way with which she approaches older characters: even in their senile isolation, they seem complex and full of life. Such is the case of “When the Hearse Goes by”, in which the elderly Bernard visits his brother’s widow in Paris and ends up having a short affair with her – in spite of saying he was not fond of either of them.

The stories “When I go Down, Go Down with me” and “Moon Hill”, told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator and a first-person protagonist respectively, deal with the theme of betrayal. In both cases, the women found out about their husbands’ affairs. In the first, Máire has fantasies of affairs with other men and being the mother of a celebrity child. In the second, Audrey discovers on a day on the beach, that her sister is carrying her husband’s child. Even with similar plots, both stories present peculiar nuances with a view to showing how some women, through inertia or fear of being alone, bear the pain of staying with men that do not love them anymore.

In addition to loss, Ní Chonchúir deals with the relationship between mothers and sons. This is the case of “Mother America”, “Spelunker” and “Queen of Tatoo”. The first is told by Chris, a boy who runs away from home and meets a mysterious woman when he hitch-hikes; and the second is told by an unnamed narrator who works on a strange gallery in the underground of Paris. Both characters love their mother and show their affection through rebellion and art. The third story, “Queen of Tatoo” is a gloomy, dark tale that describes Clyde, a rapist who asks his mother to tattoo him, since he has to run from criminals who are persecuting him. There is an unexpected turn and the mystery of the grim tonality of the descriptions and the relationships suddenly comes to light. Aligning with the theme of mothers and sons, there is the story “My Name is William Clongallen,” which is the continuation of the story “Scullion.” Here, William, after being brought up in the United States, flies to Ireland in order to discover about his origins – which the reader already knows from reading “Scullion,” that comes before that in the collection. The two stories deal with history, imagination, belonging and identity in such an astonishing way, that both characters – Mary, the mother, and William, the son – remain true to each other, and more important, similar, in spite of the separation.

In a slightly lighter tone, there are also stories that deal with hope and forgiveness, like “Easter Snow,” and “From Jesus to the Moon,” that talk about a couple’s first ultrasound scan and a narrator who returns to Rome – the place where her husband and her decided to marry – after her divorce. She finally succeeds in reclaiming or redeeming the city of Rome through an act of prayer, in which she finally forgives her husband and herself for the mistakes they have made. Religion also figures elsewhere, in “Passion d’Avril” and “Moongazer,” which touch on Christianity and primitive rituals. Moreover, the intersection of fiction with reality is also present in *Mother America*: the story “Cri de Coeur” is about the relationship between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Apparently, it is told by a woman with whom Hughes had an affair and who runs to Ireland in order

to have a safe life. She describes Irish landscape through mixed feelings of security and contempt.

In short, *Mother America* is a collection that deserves attention and praise not only for its author's mastery of her craft, but also for its poignant language and complexity of human bonding. Reliability lies in the dichotomy between darkness and light or revelation and obscurity that Woolf so well identified in short story language – and which is a major source of strength for Nuala Ní Chonchúir.

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### **Works Cited**

Kemp, Sandra. "Introduction". *Selected Short Stories*. By Virginia Woolf. England: Penguin Books, 1993.