

Auxiliadora Pérez Vides 2003: *Sólo ellas: familia y feminismo en la novela irlandesa contemporánea*. Huelva: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Huelva. 144 pp.

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In her fascinating study, *Sólo ellas: familia y feminismo en la novela irlandesa contemporánea*, Auxiliadora Pérez Vides views the institution of the family in Ireland and, in particular, the non-conventional family arrangements, from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines feminist issues, literary criticism and sociology. Rather than attesting the fundamental importance of relationships between the different members of the family, this book attempts to access the figure of the *lone mother* in contemporary Ireland, and the possible alternatives available to her, as well as examining mothering as a gendered activity and ideology, and its portrayal in fiction. In doing so, this book follows a recent trend in feminist criticism—that of using psychoanalysis and/or philosophy—to explore the long-forgotten subjectivity of the mother. Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1980) pioneered this shift in balance from the daughter to the mother. Since then, many studies have clearly established firm grounds on this subject, thus providing the necessary theoretical tools for a literary analysis of the figure of the mother. One such book is *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* (1991), edited by Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy, which focused on the consideration of the maternal voice and perspective in contemporary narratives and, in particular, the “notion of the double position and the double-voiced discourse of maternal subjectivity” (Daly and Reddy 5). More recently, *Las mujeres y los niños primero: discursos de la maternidad*, edited by Ángeles de la Concha and Raquel Osborne and published in 2004, insists upon the need to revise the maternal role in Western and non-Western societies. In their thorough introduction the editors state that “nos parecía urgente una reflexión sobre el tratamiento que recibe la función materna y los modelos que se ofrecen a las mujeres desde discursos culturales diversos” (2004: 8). Similarly, Auxiliadora Pérez Vides' *Sólo ellas* examines the subjectivity of the mother, or more specifically, that of the *lone mother* in contemporary Ireland. This volume proves to be very timely since family arrangements are increasingly changing all across Europe, and few studies have tackled this subject using an interdisciplinary approach as yet. In her short, but clear, introduction, the author establishes the main basis upon which her argument is constructed. Not only does she incorporate different fields of study—feminism, sociology and postmodernism—but she also maintains that it is absolutely crucial to remember the postcolonial condition of Ireland that accounts for the country's backward state and for the objectification and “maternalisation” of the figure of the Irish woman, defined only in terms of her role as a mother and/or wife. All these issues are examined through the analysis of two novels: Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers* (1982) and Catherine Dunne's *In the Beginning* (1997). Pérez Vides sees an evolution in the representation of *lone mothers* (of which she provides a definition in the last chapter of the first section), that corresponds with modifications in Irish legislation.

The author structures her work into two main sections, each consisting of several chapters. The first section, “Reflexiones teóricas,” unfolds the sophisticated theoretical framework of this study. In it, Pérez Vides explores how poststructuralism, postmodernism

and feminism manifest similar concerns. Even though Michel Foucault and Jean Francois Lyotard are briefly invoked to explain the main tenets of poststructuralism and postmodernism, respectively, the core of this section is taken up with a discussion of feminism and with studies about the roles ascribed to women in society and how these roles are being reshaped and challenged, both in theoretical and practical terms. Simone de Beauvoir is mentioned, among others, but the work of the French feminists—Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva—predominates throughout the first section. As the author succinctly shows, they tried, to a greater or lesser extent, to offer an alternative (feminine) version to the discourse of the Father, to be found in the semiotic, pre-linguistic phase. One of the most interesting aspects of their work lies in the fact that the mother occupies a central position. Pérez Vides then moves on to the Anglo-American feminists who, working along the same lines as the French feminists (and yet maintaining some irreconcilable differences), examined the question of mothering and mother-daughter relationships using a more sociology-based approach. Adrienne Rich, writes Pérez Vides, “introdujo gran parte de las consideraciones actuales de la maternidad desde enfoques feministas en su libro *Nacemos de mujer*” (33). In her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Rich makes a clear distinction between *motherhood* and *mothering* that will be subsequently used in many exploratory works, as in De la Concha and Osborne’s *Las mujeres y los niños primero*: “[se distingue] entre la maternidad como discurso institucional dentro de una sociedad de corte patriarcal y la maternidad como experiencia, con frecuencia contradictoria y ciertamente mucho más compleja, de las propias mujeres” (2004: 8). Pérez Vides also gives credit to Nancy J. Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), reissued with a new preface in 1999, for being the most influential book on the revision of the subject of mothering ever written. This statement is not too far-fetched if one considers that the journal *Contemporary Sociology* “named [Chodorow’s book] as one of the ‘ten most influential books in the past twenty-five years’” (Buhle 1999: 14). Pérez Vides’ discussion on feminism and mothering ends with the idea that there is an increasing interest in the re-interpretation of the nuclear family from the perspective of the mother, as in the two novels under consideration.

The rest of the first section deals with Ireland and the particular characteristics of a country that has been under British rule since the twelfth century. From the latter part of the nineteenth century up to and well into the twentieth, Ireland fought to gain its independence. The Irish Free State was finally approved in 1922 and the authorities deemed important the re-creation of an Irish mythology. Ireland was, then, feminised and a great many authors started to refer to their own country as “Mother Ireland,” giving the image of an asexual mother, compliant and self-sacrificing, whose children fought for her, while she fulfilled her maternal role. The author maintains that the postcolonial condition of Ireland has played a crucial role in projecting the cultural image of the Irish woman as mother and/or wife, which has been equally defended by the Catholic Church and the State. Given this situation, Irish feminists have had to fight hard to erase prejudices and stereotypes that have restricted women to the domestic sphere, and made femininity coterminous with maternity. Although there is much to do, writes Pérez Vides, “en los últimos años Irlanda ha presenciado un crecimiento en la lucha por la definición de la mujer irlandesa desde perspectivas feministas” (42). Following a survey of the history of feminist activism in Ireland, the author concentrates on the family as a defining feature of

the social organisation of gender that helps construct and reproduce male dominance in Ireland. From the 1950s onwards, feminist groups and activists questioned this situation and opened the door to new ways of formulating and arranging family life. Pérez Vides, then, notes that special attention is now being given to the rising group of the so-called *lone mothers*, also known as *unmarried mothers* or *women-headed households*, from a sociological viewpoint. However, fiction writers also feel the need to give voice to these preoccupations about the construction of femininity, and in their novels they consider the possibilities available to a *lone mother* in contemporary Ireland. The novels under study by Pérez Vides, Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers* and Catherine Dunne's *In the Beginning*, constitute valuable sources of information on the gradual changes that have been carried out in legislative and cultural affairs concerning the woman question, such as the passing of the Divorce Act in 1997. In this sense, both Callaghan and Dunne can be grouped together with other Irish women writers who focus on the situation of women in contemporary Ireland, like Edna O'Brien, Jennifer Johnston, and Clare Boylan, among others.

The second section of this study is entitled "Sólo ellas: construcciones contemporáneas de la familia," and comprises two chapters that examine Callaghan's *Mothers* and Dunne's *In the Beginning*, respectively. Pérez Vides deals extensively with Callaghan's novel, the story of three different women of various ages and how they cope with an unexpected pregnancy. Although this is not a cross-generational novel, the protagonists are somehow linked by their responses to their pregnancies, and this is proved to be the case at the end of the novel when they meet. For the analysis of the novel, Pérez Vides structures the discussion in two parts: firstly, she tackles the pervasive influence of a Catholic upbringing in the lives of these Irish women; secondly, the author considers all the possible choices open to *lone mothers* at that time, be that adoption, abortion, marriage or a woman-headed household. Lastly, Pérez Vides draws the reader's attention to the final episode of the novel because, to her, this last scene highlights the relevance of sisterhood and affinity between women who share the same lot: "Remember, if you decide to have the baby, there are people who'll help. Miss Legge would have. She's not here now. But there's your mother. And—I can help. I can help" (qtd. in Pérez Vides 93). The author takes pains to show that *Mothers* faithfully reflects the powerful influence that the Catholic Church has exerted in the relegation of women to the private sphere, while public roles have been traditionally assigned to men. Further, Pérez Vides sees that one of the most important tenets of Catholicism—sexual intercourse being acceptable only within marriage—has led to both the idealisation of sexual relationships and the infantilisation of women. In this sense, Father Bolan represents in the novel the restrictions imposed by the Church on its practitioners.

The three unmarried mothers of the novel—Agnes, Harriet and Ronnie—are marginalised by the Irish communities they live in, but, finally, they will have to make choices that, to varying degrees, will affect their own identities. Agnes gives her child in adoption and, taking Agnes' decision as starting point, Pérez Vides develops her argument about adoption in Ireland during the twentieth century and, more specifically, in the 1930s when Agnes became a *lone mother*. To this end, the author makes use of her sophisticated theoretical framework and applies terms and concepts of feminist writers and thinkers like Adrienne Rich and Simone de Beauvoir to the novel under consideration. Pérez Vides comes to the conclusion that Agnes could not really choose what to do with the child, that

she was forced to give her baby in adoption and that the ultimate consequence of this fact was a fragmented identity, which is reflected in the last chapter when Agnes, hospitalised, has visions and memories of her past life that erupt spontaneously. Harriet, the second *lone mother*, is pregnant by her best friend's husband. She does not take adoption or abortion as a solution to her situation. Instead, Harriet chooses to marry James, an old friend, out of social pressure, a decision she will regret for the rest of her life and that makes everyone unhappy. Ronnie, the third *lone mother*, completes this triad and the time when her story is set, the 1980s, clearly makes a difference as to the possible solutions to an unexpected (and unwelcome) pregnancy. Two different choices were then available to women: either having an abortion (that had to be carried out in London), or keeping the child and thus constituting a woman-centred household. The ending is open so as to suggest that in the 1980s, when the novel was published, this was an ongoing issue that was (and still is) deeply controversial in Ireland. To supplement this analysis of Callaghan's novel, Pérez Vides concludes by examining the disruptive nature of the novel itself. She sees in the novel a persistent foregrounding of the artistic capacity of these three women, something, which Pérez Vides argues, patriarchy has systematically curtailed and silenced. This is best illustrated by the character of Ronnie who aspires to turn herself into a feminist writer, as well as by means of intertextual references and borrowings. However, the novel stands as a challenge to traditional narratives in that there is not a single, authorised voice that controls the entire narration, but, rather, three voices (among others) that help give us a more complete vision of what being an unmarried mother means in contemporary Ireland.

Pérez Vides approaches Catherine Dunne's *In the Beginning* in similar terms. She summarises the main events of the novel: Rose Holden receives a blow when her husband, Ben, leaves her and their three children to begin his holidays (and a new life) with his lover, Caroline, an old friend of the family. The novel traces the evolution of the character of Rose, a middle-class woman, who has to learn to cope alone with her children, the household and her new job as a baker of homemade pastries, pies and bread. According to Pérez Vides, this novel is particularly relevant in this study since it investigates the intricate legal process of divorce in contemporary Ireland, before the Divorce Act was finally passed in 1997 (the year the novel was published). Despite all the difficulties she encounters, Rose gets the divorce. As a *lone mother*, she will have to begin anew and start all over again, now without the supportive presence of her husband or a partner. Dunne explores the different emotional phases that a *lone mother*, in this particular case, a separated woman, goes through when she takes charge of the family. One of the most common feelings Rose has in the first stages of her new life as a *lone mother* is guilt: she feels responsible for the failure of her marriage. And yet, as Pérez Vides notes, Rose overcomes this feeling, realising that she is now the provider of her household and an independent woman. This turns her into a different person altogether who acquires self-esteem and confidence in contrast with what happened when Rose's husband was still living with them, when the husband, in Pérez Vides' words, "aparece entonces como la figura idealizada, representante de la autoridad patriarcal y cuyos intereses deben ser complacidos, aún en detrimento de la figura femenina, que debe venerarle" (104). Her new job provides the freedom and independence she had lost when she became a wife and mother: "As she kneaded, she planned for baguettes, home-made doughnuts, rye loaves. She'd do samples of them all, and supply Colette with whatever she wanted. Maybe if Colette didn't want her, someone else would. This, at least, was something she could do.

She'd never get her picture in the paper, she was still forty-two, but maybe, maybe, she would yet make a living with an ordinary, down-to-earth, humble brown roll" (qtd. in Pérez Vides 107). In metaphorical terms, in making pastries, she is able to re-shape and mould her life as she wishes. However, not only does she recover her creative capacity (represented in her pastry making), but she also gains eloquence and discursive power. Pérez Vides applies the psychoanalytic feminist ideas of Cixous about the silencing of the female voice to the analysis of Dunne's novel and contends that, by foregrounding the female voice, *In the Beginning* poses a challenge to male dominance. Additionally, as happened with *Mothers*, the cooperation between women proves to be extremely helpful. But the two novels bear more resemblances: Dunne's novel also breaks the illusion of a single, authorised voice. In other words, *In the Beginning* contains a plurality of voices, which enter at particular moments, and then move back and forward, thus offering a comprehensive view of all the events that led to the break-up of Rose and Ben's marriage. More importantly, Pérez Vides convincingly argues that Dunne's novel deserves some attention as an example of the rewriting of the biblical text: Genesis. Therefore, Dunne could be aligned with other feminist novelists like Michèle Roberts as they attempt to give alternative versions of canonical texts, like the Bible, through their novels.

Lastly, the author's excellent analysis of both Mary Rose Callaghan's *Mothers* and Catherine Dunne's *In the Beginning* demonstrates that, due to the span of time covered by the two novels, it is possible to trace an evolution in the literary representation of the *lone mother*, which in turn reflects the cultural changes that are gradually taking place in Ireland. As Pérez Vides postulates, "[e]l texto literario se convierte entonces en el vehículo para no sólo representar los problemas de estas mujeres, sino también reclamar la reconstrucción del modelo familiar canónico a favor de nuevas estructuras familiares, de tal manera que . . . sea posible favorecer la plena construcción de la identidad femenina irlandesa" (134). At times exciting and informative, this book, ultimately, is an immensely valuable contribution not only to Irish studies, but also to the field of feminism and gender studies, and should long stand as a central point of reference and information for specialists and general readers alike.

Works Cited

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