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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Watching to Narrating: Thirdspace and Female Experience in *The Mai*

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| ABSTRACT
Irish playwright Marina Carr's *The Mai*, on the surface, depicts the marital tragedy of the mother Mai and reveals the emotional predicament of Irish women within the cyclical patterns of family and history. At the level of narration, however, the daughter Millie's ways of watching and telling stand in tension with that content. Her gaze shifts from standing at the window to watching her mother looking outward, transforming the inherited posture of intergenerational looking from unconscious repetition into a spatial practice open to reflection. The ensuing "Aleph-like" voice-over breaks linear time, juxtaposing past and present, reality and imagination within synchronic scenes and making language itself a medium for the "production" of space. Through the interweaving of the window and the voice-over, the play constructs a Thirdspace that combines constraint and resistance, allowing female experience to be seen again and the tragic cycle to be transformed into an open narrative practice. In this way, the play responds to the contemporary feminist-narratological orientation that values both narrative form and social context.

| KEYWORDS

Marina Carr; *The Mai*; Thirdspace; spatial narration; female experience

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Irish playwright Marina Carr (1964–) reshapes stage narrative from a female perspective and, as one critic has observed, effectively recasts the Abbey Theatre as a dramatic space centred on women. First staged in 1994, The Mai marked a major turning point in Carr's career. It not only won the Dublin Theatre Festival Best New Play Award (Li, 2015, p. 110), but has also been widely regarded as a foundational work in establishing Carr's reputation as a major playwright (Doyle, 2006, p. 41). Yet ever since its premiere, this much-praised play has generated a continuing controversy: does it pessimistically repeat the fatal cycle of women's destiny, or does it conceal, in its narrative form, a force capable of breaking through that predicament?

Around the central question of fatalism and emancipation, criticism on *The Mai* has long been divided between two opposed tendencies. Early critics emphasized the play's tragic fatalism, arguing that the women in it "abandon confrontation with patriarchy" (Wallace, 2001, p. 437) and that, even in the prosperity of the 1990s, the play presents "an extremely pessimistic view of Irish women" (McMullan, 2001, p. 81). Such readings stress recurrence, inheritance, and the seeming impossibility of change. Within this interpretive frame, the women of the play are trapped inside a familial and historical rhythm whose outcome is already predetermined.

Feminist criticism, by contrast, has sought to uncover the play's disruptive dimension. Some scholars argue that, by portraying flawed mothers rather than sanctified maternal figures, Carr breaks the myth of the "holy mother" that has burdened Irish cultural representations of women (Sihra, 2005, p. 145). Others reinterpret The Mai's suicide not as simple capitulation but as a "creative act," thereby attempting to reclaim agency from within abjection itself (Hill, 2009, p. 44). The intervention of spatial criticism has further complicated the debate. González Chacón (2020) argues that Carr's women are "always on some kind of edge," inhabiting marginal positions from which they struggle to secure both identity and autonomy (p. 97). Tang and Shi (2017), meanwhile, show how Carr's female characters resist patriarchal and Catholic discipline through the occupation and contestation of multiple spaces (p. 127). These readings do not deny the presence of pain or repetition, but they do insist that the very spaces in which pain occurs can also become sites of resistance.

Yet whatever their interpretive differences, these studies ultimately converge on the same question: whether The Mai escapes fatalism or possesses agency. The difficulty, I suggest, lies in the fact that most criticism remains focused on The Mai's story as a

told object and pays far less attention to the spatial production of the act of telling itself. Even when critics have noticed the play's distinctive structure as a memory play (Morse, 1996; Ní Dhuibhne, 2003), observed that Carr "re-calls the storyteller's perspective" (Roche, 2003), or identified Millie as "the first truly independent woman in the family's four generations" (Trotter, 2000, p. 172), discussion has tended to return to the problem of character agency. Once Millie herself is judged to remain haunted by Owl Lake and the play is said to offer no clear exit from mythic trauma (Hancock, 2005, p. 23), the analysis circles back to the same opposition between entrapment and release.

A more fundamental narratological problem is thus obscured. Although the play is entitled The Mai, the stage direction notes that Millie "remains onstage throughout the play" (Carr, 1999, p. 107). The one who truly controls the narration and directly faces the audience is not The Mai, but the daughter who is at once a sixteen-year-old witness and a thirty-year-old retrospective narrator. Why is the story of the mother told by the daughter? Why can The Mai not speak for herself? How does Millie come to possess this narrative authority, and what is the nature of that authority? Once these questions are brought to the fore, the interpretive centre of gravity shifts from the female character as tragic object to the spatial and formal conditions under which female experience becomes narratable at all.

The question, then, is not simply what happens to The Mai, but how that happening is made visible and intelligible on stage. The play's surface tragedy and its deeper narrative structure do not wholly coincide. Rather, a tension emerges between them, and it is precisely this tension that allows the play to exceed the narrow alternatives of resignation and liberation. In what follows, I argue that this excess is spatial in nature. Through the recurring image of the window and the carefully organized pattern of Millie's voice-over, The Mai produces a Thirdspace in which female experience is not merely represented but re-seen and re-voiced.

The emphasis on spatial form also responds to a broader development in modern Irish drama. Carr's theatre remains deeply rooted in an Irish stage tradition that values storytelling, yet in *The Mai* storytelling is no longer merely a vehicle for recovering the past. It becomes a way of reorganizing the relation between past and present, image and body, memory and scene. What emerges is not simply a temporal consciousness concerned with what has happened, but a spatial imagination concerned with how different times, affects, and histories are made to coexist. This is one reason the play matters for feminist narratology. It demonstrates that the politics of female experience cannot be separated from the formal arrangement through which experience is made visible. To ask who speaks, from where, and through what spatial configuration is already to ask how power and subjectivity are distributed on stage.

2. The Window and the Space of Looking

In The Mai, a recurring spatial image structures both the rhetoric of character relations and the production of meaning: the window. The Mai's first appearance is inseparable from it. She is introduced through a stage picture in which the body is already drawn toward a threshold of looking: "Drawn to the window, she looks out at the lake, waiting, watching" (Carr, 1999, p. 107). Thereafter, the posture of gazing at or from the window resonates with her emotional trajectory. When the marital crisis surfaces, "She goes to the window, looks out" (Carr, 1999, p. 149). When Robert leaves again, "The Mai sits at the window, smoking. Waiting for Robert" (Carr, 1999, p. 152). In the isolation of Christmas, she "sits by the window, apart from the others" (Carr, 1999, p. 178). Millie's final voice-over pushes this image to its limit: "The Mai at the window . . . The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). The play's mise-en-scène also grants the image structural significance. At the end of Act One, after Millie has narrated the tragic legend of Owl Lake, the stage direction fixes "Ghostly light on the window. Robert stands there with The Mai's body in his arms, utterly still" (Carr, 1999, p. 147). At the very end of the play, just before The Mai walks toward the lake, she again "goes to the window, and stares out" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). The window is thus both the starting point of her life story and the last witness to its tragic conclusion.

This posture extends across three generations. Aunt Julie recalls Grandma Fraochlán with bitter clarity: "You were at the window pinin' for the nine-fingered fisherman!" (Carr, 1999, p. 141). Later, in an even more telling recollection, she adds that Grandma Fraochlán "spent one half of the day in the back room pullin' on an opium pipe . . . and the other half rantin' and ravin' at us or starin' out the window at the sea" (Carr, 1999, p. 145). The same spatial position and the same direction of gaze reveal a hardened spatial practice. Desire is repeatedly staged as waiting, and waiting is repeatedly localized at the window. The persistence of this bodily orientation suggests that the women do not merely inhabit a house; they inherit a position within it.

Millie's narration points toward an answer. Looking back, she says that "The Mai set about looking for that magic thread that would stitch us together again" and found it at Owl Lake, after which "the new house was built" (Carr, 1999, pp. 110–111). This house should have been a sign of female subjectivity. As a material space, it is the product of The Mai's labour: the fruit of her work as a school principal and even of the money she earned by going to London to work as a cleaning girl. Yet the motive behind its construction and its eventual function expose an inner contradiction. Millie goes on to describe how, once the house had been made exactly as The Mai wanted it, "The Mai sat in front of this big window here, her chin moonward, a frown on her forehead, as if she were pulsing messages to some remote star . . . her lips forming two words noiselessly. Come home — come home" (Carr, 1999, p. 111). The window becomes the key to understanding the house. It joins two kinds of space: inside the window lies the material home that The Mai has built; outside it lies Owl Lake, saturated with myth.

Soja calls the space that can be described through experience "Firstspace," a space primarily concerned with the materiality of spatial forms, whereas "Secondspace" is the space conceived in thought, a re-presentation that arises from mental and cognitive

ways of imagining spatiality (Soja, 2005, pp. 12–13). The Mai's tragedy lies in being caught within the tension between these two spaces. The house, as Firstspace, is the material embodiment of her economic independence, yet from the moment of its construction it is governed by Secondspace: by the romantic myth of love that permeates the family and by Owl Lake's own legend of tragic repetition. That the house is later described by The Mai herself as "the kind of house you build when you've nowhere left to go" (Carr, 1999, p. 158) only sharpens the irony. What appears at first to be shelter and achievement reveals itself as a final enclosure.

The Mai's building of the house is therefore not pure self-realization. Rather, it is an attempt to force the romantic vision of Secondspace into the material coordinates of Firstspace, and the window is the focal point of this endeavour. In social and historical life, Secondspace often dominates Firstspace; imagined space controls concrete space (Soja, 2005, p. 45). The Mai believes she is actively summoning her lover home, but in fact she is passively repeating a script defined in advance by Secondspace. This domination of material space by ideology reveals the spatial hegemony of patriarchy. Home is not a naturally protective shelter but a site produced through relations of power (Blunt & Dowling, 2022, p. 21). On the surface, The Mai overturns conventional gender roles by building her own home. Yet the motive for doing so is still to meet the demands of a male-centred romantic myth. Her body is disciplined by the posture of waiting, and her subjectivity is emptied out by the role of wife. The house bears her name, but in effect it becomes Robert's destination.

When she sits by the window, then, she does not freely choose a place; she occupies a position already assigned and prescribed by patriarchal ideas. To ignore such regulation is to "naively" regard Firstspace as something natural and self-existing (Soja, 2005, p. 45). The root of The Mai's tragedy is that she thinks she is autonomously building a house and freely taking her place at the window without realizing that both the physical space itself and the pattern of behaviour it organizes have already been shaped by patriarchal discourse. Once oppression is experienced as nature and a designated spatial position is felt as home, resistance loses its point of departure.

How, then, does this seemingly unbreakable cycle begin to loosen? The text offers a subtle but crucial clue: the change in Millie's relation to the window. At the beginning of the play, "Millie is standing at the window" (Carr, 1999, p. 107). Her bodily posture already differs from The Mai's and suggests a state not yet wholly absorbed into the inherited pattern. By the end of the play, however, the stage direction reads: "Millie watches The Mai looking out the window" (Carr, 1999, p. 186). The shift from standing at the window to watching her mother looking out of it marks a decisive change in the direction of vision. Millie no longer gazes at the lake outside, the space shrouded in myth; instead, she withdraws her gaze and turns it toward the mother who is looking out.

Once Millie redirects her attention from the object gazed at to the subject who gazes, looking from the window ceases to be a self-evident, natural posture and becomes a spatial practice that can be observed and analyzed. The Mai is trapped in the binary logic of "I" and "the man I wait for," whereas Millie's perspective introduces a third dimension: the observer and reflector, a dimension of "othering" and "thirding" (Soja, 2005, p. 102). She decomposes waiting into a spatial phenomenon open to scrutiny and thereby reveals that the mother's place is not natural but produced; that the window is not neutral but functionalized; and that the gaze is not simply a personal choice but the result of ideology acting upon the body through spatial arrangement. This turn in perspective grants Millie a special narrative authority and marks a transformation in her own spatial identity.

As a sixteen-year-old child, she stands at the edge of the adult world; as a thirty-year-old narrator, she can cross that boundary in retrospect and understand its logic. Occupying this position between inside and outside, she retains the intimacy of experience while gaining reflective distance. She belongs to the family and can register the mother's affective plight from within, yet she also stands outside it and can discern the structural roots of the tragedy. In this double stance, Millie's marginality becomes generative rather than merely exclusionary: it is an open threshold from which one can look again, rename, and retell. As hooks writes, a marginal position can yield a distinctive "wholeness" of vision, enabling one to "look both from the outside in and from the inside out" (hooks, 1984, p. ix). Millie's telling emerges precisely from this tension between inward empathy and outward insight, transforming a family's private tragedy into a narrative space that can be understood historically and socially.

For that reason, Millie's relation to the window is not simply a matter of perspective but of spatial repositioning. For The Mai and Grandma Fraochlán, the window remains the place where desire is immobilized into repetition. For Millie, however, the same architectural feature becomes an instrument for identifying how such repetition works. She can see that the position occupied by her mother is not natural, that the body has been educated into that posture, and that the domestic interior is organized to sustain it. The window therefore changes from a site of passive expectation into a site of critical legibility. This change does not free Millie from history, but it does give her a place from which history can be narrated differently. She gains a position that can register pain without naturalizing it and can recognize inheritance without collapsing into it.

The interpenetration of Firstspace and Secondspace is also visible in the way The Mai's labour never becomes purely material. Even the money she earns through exhausting work is immediately absorbed into dream. Millie's later recollection of The Mai's summer in London makes this plain. The Mai goes there to regularize her overdraft and secure the mortgage for the house, yet the story she brings back is not one of finance but of a little Arab princess who falls in love with her in a hair salon and turns labour into a fairy-tale encounter (Carr, 1999, pp. 152–153). Material necessity and fantasy do not cancel one another; they reinforce one another. The house at Owl Lake is built out of wages, but those wages themselves are already surrounded by the aura of romance, distance, and the exotic. The apparent solidity of Firstspace is thus saturated, from the start, by the images of elsewhere through which Secondspace operates.

The window, then, undergoes a fundamental semantic shift for Millie. For The Mai and Grandma Fraochlán, it is the waiting-place defined by Secondspace and assigned to them. For Millie, it becomes an instrument of observation and critique, a point of access through which she can understand how Secondspace dominates Firstspace and how patriarchal ideas are implemented through spatial configuration. She gains a position from which she can both understand her mother's suffering and criticize the spatial predicament that produces it. In this position, looking from the window is no longer a naturalized posture but a configuration of power that can be made visible and questioned.

3. Voice-over and Narrative Space

The window provides the visual frame through which Millie sees the spatial pivot of the tragedy; but to turn observation into critique and historical rewriting she also needs language. This is where the voice-over comes in. If a distinctive spatial position gives Millie the possibility of seeing, then the carefully arranged voice-over passages threaded through the play provide her with the tool of telling.

The play closes with a long voice-over by Millie. She says that none of The Mai and Robert's children are strong: "We teeter along the fringe of the world with halting gait, reeking of Owl Lake at every turn" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). She then describes how she dreams of water, wrestles with a black swan, and feels Owl Lake "like a caul around my chest" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). The full movement of the passage is worth recalling: "I dream of water all the time. I'm floundering off the shore, or bursting towards the surface for air, or wrestling with a black swan trying to drag me under. I have not yet emerged triumphant from those lakes of the night. Sometimes I think I wear Owl Lake like a caul around my chest to protect me from all that is good and hopeful and worth pursuing" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). What seems at first like recollection quickly unsettles any ordinary logic of time, because the words that follow are not ordered as past events but arrive as simultaneous scenes: "Images rush past me from that childhood landscape. There's The Mai talking to the builders about the dimensions of Robert's study and there's Robert playing football with Stephen and Jack, and Orla on her swing. Now Grandma Fraochlan is lighting her pipe as Beck wanders in and pours a drink . . . Julie and Agnes colluderin' in the corner, The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). These sentences do not unfold according to chronological sequence. They appear instead as a string of scenes existing simultaneously. The verbs are in the progressive, and every action is held in an unfinished present. Millie narrates past events as if they were still happening, keeping each action open. This prolonged progressiveness condenses time into the instant of narration and turns language into a field of vision. Grammar itself becomes a spatial device. The transformation of tense and aspect constitutes the smallest unit of spatialized narration, folding time into the structure of speech.

The cluster of images that follows makes the narrative mechanism even clearer. Millie's "images rush past me" is not a passive recollection but an active gathering together. She recombines fragments scattered across different temporal layers of the play and forms a synchronic picture. "The Mai talking to the builders about the dimensions of Robert's study" recalls the scene in which she builds the house in search of the "magic thread" (Carr, 1999, pp. 110–111). "Grandma Fraochlán's oar" points back to the opening conflict in which the grandmother insists on bringing the oar into the house (Carr, 1999, pp. 111–112). Grandma Fraochlán lighting her pipe comes from the passages in which she summons ghosts and drifts between the Sultan of Spain and the nine-fingered fisherman (Carr, 1999, pp. 120–121). Julie and Agnes "colluderin' in the corner" recalls the aunts' plot to prevent Beck's divorce (Carr, 1999, p. 135). "The Mai at the window" recurs throughout the play, especially at decisive moments at the beginning and end of both acts (Carr, 1999, pp. 107, 147, 149, 184, 186). This final voice-over compresses the core images scattered through the earlier voice-overs into a single paragraph. Juxtaposition replaces sequence, and different moments coexist in space. Millie does not foreground causality. She foregrounds coexistence, and thus language shifts from linear narration to spatial narration.

It is in this sense that Millie's final voice-over constructs something like Borges's Aleph, that tiny point in which all spaces coexist. Borges describes the Aleph as a minute point whose diameter is "probably two or three centimetres" and yet in which "all the scenes of the world" are present, every one of them seen "from every point in the universe" (Borges, 1971, pp. 3–17). The closing monologue occupies only a very small amount of textual space, yet it contains the universe of the entire play: four generations of women, a century of history, and multiple layers of space. The paragraph does not heap up fragments at random. Rather, it works as a carefully designed index system that points back to the play's key moments.

The voice-over passages that run through the play are, in turn, the various angles from which the world inside that Aleph can be seen. They encompass four generations of women, a century of history, myth and reality, life and death, resistance and submission. This is a complete universe. Millie's passages about The Mai stage the mother's house-building, her preparations for her own wake, and her summer labour in London, revealing the conjunction of work, sacrifice, and waiting (Carr, 1999, pp. 110–111, 128–129, 152–153). The passages about Grandma Fraochlán disclose the legend of her own origins and her conversations with ghosts, exposing the fictionality of romantic myth (Carr, 1999, pp. 115–116, 120–121). The passages about Beck stage a woman's attempt to break out of the institution of marriage (Carr, 1999, pp. 134–135). The passages about the lake legend weave mythical time into historical time (Carr, 1999, pp. 146–147). The passages about acts of violence foreshadow The Mai's death (Carr, 1999, pp. 157–158). And the passages about Millie herself reveal her simultaneous repetition and critique of romantic narratives (Carr, 1999, pp. 164–165, 184). These voice-overs do not linearly supply background information. Rather, they function as folds in time, constantly breaking the closure of the stage present set in 1979 and folding other temporal layers into the same narrative space.

One can see this especially clearly in the London passage. On the surface, Millie's account of her mother working as "a sweeping girl in an Arab hairdressing salon" seems to provide background information about the financial struggle behind the new house (Carr, 1999, p. 152). Yet the passage quickly becomes something else: a narrative about an already betrothed child princess who insists that only The Mai can wash and brush her hair, until the two become playmates in a strange, impossible world beneath Marble Arch (Carr, 1999, pp. 152–153). This is not merely anecdotal. It shows how voice-over refuses to keep economic necessity and fantasy in separate compartments. Even while recounting debt, labour, and temporary migration, Millie is also recounting The Mai's attachment to enchanted alternatives. The voice-over thus keeps revealing how female desire is shaped within a field where survival and imagination remain inseparable.

The voice-over that appears during the early days of Robert's return, at a seemingly joyful moment when the family is planning an outing, shows this folding mechanism most clearly. It breaks completely with the warmth of the scene: "Maybe we did go into town the following day, I don't remember . . . What I do remember, however, is one morning a year and a half later when Robert and I drove into town to buy a blue nightgown and a blue bedjacket for The Mai's waking" (Carr, 1999, pp. 128–129). The future-in-the-past—The Mai's death in 1980—suddenly invades the present-in-the-past—the brief happiness of 1979. More importantly, this passage goes on to describe how, while buying the clothes for the wake, Robert is knocked into a display stand and "About him on the floor, packets of needles and spools of thread all the colours of the rainbow" lie scattered (Carr, 1999, p. 129). These needles and threads echo the "magic thread" The Mai sought earlier and also anticipate the line in the final monologue about the world that "tore our hearts out for a song" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). In that moment, three temporal layers are folded together through the image of thread: Robert's first departure, the short reunion, and the scattering of thread after The Mai's death, all converging in the Aleph-like instant of Millie's retrospective narration.

The voice-over about the legend performs a similar operation by folding mythical time into history. After Millie retells the legend of Owl Lake, the stage direction reads: "Ghostly light on the window. Robert stands there with The Mai's body in his arms, utterly still" (Carr, 1999, p. 147). Mythic time—Coillte's lake of tears—future time—The Mai's corpse—and the time of narration—Millie's retrospective gaze—overlap at the spatial node of the window. The legend predicts The Mai's death, The Mai's death confirms the legend, and Millie weaves them together. In the stage direction immediately following her narration, she says, "A tremor runs through me when I recall the legend of Owl Lake" (Carr, 1999, p. 147). The "I" here is both the sixteen-year-old girl moving through the legend and the thirty-year-old narrator trembling as she recalls it. The two "I"s coexist within the same sentence and are finally gathered into the picture where all moments stand side by side.

Genette argues that spatial form reverses the successive time of reading and, in a sense, cancels it out (Genette, 1987, p. 190). Millie's narration realizes precisely such a cancellation. The spectator is compelled to process several temporal layers at once: on stage there is the present progressive of 1979, while the voice-overs interweave every other temporal layer from myth to retrospection. Millie creates not a river, running from source to ending, but an Owl Lake in which all moments gather. As Bachelard writes, "space contains compressed time" (Bachelard, 2009, pp. 6–7). Millie compresses time into space, so that the past no longer simply disappears but can be repeatedly re-entered and re-viewed. The final monologue functions as a miniature Aleph, while the earlier voice-overs constitute its unfolding universe: one sees the world from every angle in the Aleph and sees the Aleph again in the world (Borges, 1971, p. 9).

When Soja elaborates his theory of Thirdspace, he directly takes Borges's Aleph as a key metaphor. By linking the significance of the Aleph to Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Soja emphasizes the radical openness of Thirdspace: a space in which all places are contained and which can be viewed from any angle (Soja, 2005, p. 68). Millie's narration operates as precisely such a production of space. Firstspace is the physical house, the lake, and the window. Secondspace is the fantasy of romantic love and the mythology of the "magic thread." Thirdspace is the narrative field generated by Millie's voice-over, at once real and imagined, inclusive and exceeding. Within this field, time is spatialized and history is reorganized into a multidimensional structure that can be seen.

This spatialization also alters the audience's role. Viewers are not asked to follow a neat chronology from origin to outcome; instead, they are required to hold several temporalities in suspension at once. The effect is less that of moving down a line than of standing before a lake whose surface gathers reflections from different directions. Millie's narration thus turns spectatorship into an activity of assembling relations among simultaneously present fragments. Soja's concept of Thirdspace helps explain this effect because it names precisely such a lived and hybrid zone where material sites, remembered scenes, mythical figures, and projected futures coexist without collapsing into one another. The narrative space of The Mai is therefore open rather than closed: it does not resolve contradictions into synthesis, but preserves them as part of the play's way of knowing female history

4. Female Subjectivity in an Unfinished History

Through the foregoing analysis of the window and the voice-over, it becomes clear that Millie "produces" a Thirdspace through a change in her position of looking and a reorganization of narrative time. The window makes the posture of waiting at the window available for scrutiny as a configuration of space, while the voice-over folds linear time into a synchronic field in which the experiences of four generations of women can unfold side by side. But what kind of space is this Thirdspace, and what is its political force?

Ellen gained access to education in the 1920s and became the brilliant daughter whose life seemed full of promise, only to be forced in the 1930s to marry a builder who, Julie recalls, "couldn't write or spell very well" (Carr, 1999, p. 145). The Mai achieved

economic independence in the 1970s and built a house with her own hands, yet still ended up waiting by the window for her husband to return. Millie, as the narrator speaking from the later present, looks back on all of this and admits that "We teeter along the fringe of the world with halting gait, reeking of Owl Lake at every turn" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). In her narration, these experiences do not form a progressive line leading from oppression to liberation, nor do they amount to a simple cycle of doom. Rather, they appear as multiple states juxtaposed in space. Liberation and constraint do not follow one another in sequence; they operate simultaneously on different dimensions.

The play itself repeatedly dramatizes this simultaneity. Grandma Fraochlán's sexual radicalism coexists with her conservatism about her daughter's marriage. On one occasion she declares, with almost scandalous freedom, "You're born, ya have sex, and then ya die. And if you're one of them lucky few whom the gods has blessed, they will send to you a lover with whom you will partake of that most rare and sublime love there is to partake of in this wild and lonely planet" (Carr, 1999, p. 143). Yet this same woman is implicated in forcing Ellen into marriage under the pressure of shame. Beck's divorce and geographical flight do not bring full inner release. Connie opts for a "pragmatic marriage" in exchange for material security while also fantasizing about "a single bed of my own and then to head off to a hotel every now and then" (Carr, 1999, p. 160). Each generation of women confronts new forms of bondage and new possibilities under specific historical conditions. Such a representation resists any reduction of female experience to a single narrative. The oscillation between positions is as important as the illusion produced by any isolated position (Soja, 2005, p. 82). What Millie reveals is not an achieved end point but the unfinished nature of history itself. None of these women has arrived at a fully emancipated state; there are only processes that continue to shift across different dimensions.

The dialogue among the sisters makes this unfinished history particularly visible. Connie dreams aloud of going to a hotel with a stranger she has picked up in a pub or on a train because she has "never had a room to myself" and longs for "a single bed of my own" (Carr, 1999, p. 160). The Mai immediately recognizes the desire and answers, with cruel accuracy, that "the only difference between Robert and us is that Robert does what we dream about doing" (Carr, 1999, p. 160). The line crystallizes the play's uneasy politics of gender. What appears as male freedom is not outside the women's field of desire; it is bound up with fantasies they too have internalized. Yet the social cost of acting on those fantasies is radically uneven. The same wish that appears as adventurous mobility in a man returns as scandal, humiliation, or abandonment in a woman. This asymmetry is precisely why the women's history in the play cannot be reduced either to heroic resistance or passive suffering. Their desires are real, but the spaces available for living them are profoundly unequal.

This unfinished quality becomes especially prominent at the level of subjectivity. Grandma Fraochlán, even at the age of one hundred, openly supports her granddaughter's divorce and articulates an irreverent, even subversive, discourse of sexuality. Yet it is this same grandmother who, when her daughter Ellen becomes pregnant, yields to the pressure of social shame and forces her into the very kind of marriage that will break her spirit. Julie arrives with novenas and holy medals to stop Beck from divorcing, yet later slips money to The Mai in private and tells her not to let anyone know she gave another envelope to Beck (Carr, 1999, p. 146). These apparently contradictory actions are not simply signs of divided personality. They are the necessary condition of a subject positioned within the tensions of Thirdspace. These women are both victims of patriarchy and its executors; they desire resistance, yet they are also compelled to maintain order. Such contradiction shows that subjectivity cannot be fixed as either oppression or liberation. It is a process continuously pulled by multiple forces and continuously "produced."

Millie herself is caught in this productive contradiction. In the voice-over about her son Joseph, she says, "I tell him all the good things," inventing for him a romantic story of a New York encounter while deliberately suppressing the facts that the man is married and refuses to acknowledge paternity (Carr, 1999, pp. 164–165). The passage is revealingly split between fantasy and disclosure. "I tell him his eyes are brown and his hair is black and that he loved to drink Jack Daniels by the neck," she says, but immediately afterwards insists: "I do not tell him that he is married . . . I do not tell him that on the day you were born . . . I wrote a sensible letter . . . asking him to acknowledge paternity. And I do not tell him he didn't answer" (Carr, 1999, pp. 164–165). This romanticization of the father reproduces the grandmother's legend of the nine-fingered fisherman. Yet within the same passage, when Millie turns to say, "I do not tell him that on the day you were born," the addressee suddenly shifts from the third-person "him" to the second-person "you." The narrated object is transformed from an absent figure into a present interlocutor.

This abrupt grammatical and pronominal shift has the effect, on stage, of a direct address to the audience. The spectator is no longer a detached receiver but becomes a co-present witness who is implicitly interrogated. Glorification and exposure coexist within the same narrative space. Millie is at once telling a romantic story and dismantling it; she is both narrator and one captured by the very traditions she narrates; both critic and inheritor; both desirous of escape and unable wholly to escape. This condition contains simultaneously the real, the imagined, and the symbolic. It is full of possibility, but it is also dangerous (Soja, 2005, p. 87). Millie's subjectivity is continuously produced in this open and unfinished process.

5. Thirdspace as Open Narrative Practice

Yet it is precisely this unfinished quality that constitutes the political power of Thirdspace. When, at the end of the play, Millie repeats "The Mai at the window . . . The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again" (Carr, 1999, p. 184), this is no longer merely the repetition of a fatal cycle. Through the shift in how she looks, she turns the naturalized posture of waiting at the window into something that can be questioned; through the act of watching, she withdraws herself from that posture and

acquires the distance necessary for reflection and critique. She then confesses: "Sometimes I think I wear Owl Lake like a caul around my chest . . . And on a confident day when I am considering a first shaky step towards something within my grasp, the caul constricts and I am back at Owl Lake again" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). She dreams of wrestling with a black swan and still has "not yet emerged triumphant from those lakes of the night" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). This confession makes clear that Millie has not triumphantly escaped trauma. She continues to struggle, to think, and to speak from within it. Soja insists that the lifeworld can never be fully known, yet knowledge of it can guide us as we seek change, emancipation, and freedom within conditions of domination (Soja, 2005, pp. 76–78). The Thirdspace produced by Millie is therefore not an already achieved site of liberation. It is a generative field in which change becomes thinkable.

This is why the play's politics does not lie in a simple replacement of despair with optimism. Julie's bitter reflection offers an important clue here. After recounting what Grandma Fraochlán's stories and fantasies did to Ellen, she concludes: "It's not fair they should teach us desperation so young or if they do they should never mention hope" (Carr, 1999, p. 146). The point is crucial. The damage done to the women in this family does not arise only from prohibition and repression; it also arises from a distorted education in hope. They are taught to wait for the extraordinary, to anticipate rescue, to imagine that love will arrive from elsewhere and make life whole. Later, when the three sisters recall their childhood dreams, The Mai acknowledges that Grandma Fraochlán "filled us with hope — too much hope maybe — in things to come. And her stories made us long for something extraordinary to happen in our lives" (Carr, 1999, p. 163). The Mai adds that she wanted her life to be "huge and heroic and pure as in the days of yore" and imagined moving through the world with a prince at her side (Carr, 1999, p. 163). Hope, in other words, is not innocent; it is part of the machinery of repetition.

Millie's narration does not simply abandon hope, however. Instead, it displaces hope from mythic fulfilment to narrative openness. Grandma Fraochlán once declares: "we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same" (Carr, 1999, p. 123). The "song" that, in Millie's final voice-over, "tore our hearts out" seems at first to confirm that fatalism (Carr, 1999, p. 184). Yet through the Thirdspace produced by the window and the voice-over, what changes is not the tune itself but the way it is heard and understood. The grandmother's assertion is suspended and becomes an open proposition that can be continually rethought. Narrative does not erase repetition; it estranges it. It turns inherited suffering into something observable, analyzable, and therefore no longer wholly opaque.

The ending itself sharpens this point. Millie's last monologue does not conclude with mastery. It concludes with persistence: "The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again, and it goes on and on till I succumb and linger among them there in that dead silent world that tore our hearts out for a song" (Carr, 1999, p. 184). The force of the passage lies in the fact that succumbing and narrating happen together. Millie is not outside the scene she reconstructs; she lingers among the images even as she arranges them. Thirdspace is therefore not a purified outside from which the past can be judged without remainder. It is the unstable site at which one remains implicated in the past and yet still speaks. This is why the play's final gesture is not resolution but exposure: the images continue, the song continues, but so does the act of narration that prevents them from remaining mute.

Within this space, the experiences of Grandma Fraochlán, Ellen, The Mai, and Beck are all granted the right to appear. Their acts of resistance, whether successful or not, become ways of writing the complexity of women's history. Connie's compromise, Beck's flight, and The Mai's persistence are not judged as simply right or wrong; they are presented together. When Julie's public condemnation stands beside her private sympathy, or when Connie's practicality stands beside The Mai's obstinate fidelity, what emerges is not a moral ranking but the limits and possibilities attached to each choice under specific historical conditions. This very juxtaposition challenges any single hegemonic narrative. Millie offers no final answer. Rather, she produces a space in which contradiction can unfold and multiple possibilities can be thought.

What gives this arrangement its force is that the play refuses to sort these women into stable moral categories. The grandmother's irreverence, Julie's severity, Connie's compromise, Beck's flight, and The Mai's fidelity all carry both damage and possibility. Millie's narration does not erase the violence done by patriarchy, but neither does it reduce female experience to a single register of victimhood. By placing divergent acts and attitudes within the same field, she makes visible the uneven, partial, and historically specific forms that resistance can take. Thirdspace is politically significant precisely because it allows contradiction to remain active rather than prematurely solved. It does not produce a consoling alternative world. It produces a way of seeing in which family history can no longer appear natural, singular, or inevitable.

Through narration, Millie regains the subject-position from which family history can be interpreted; but this subjectivity is itself fractured. Her refusal does not take the form of declaring that she will never repeat the past. Instead, it lies in constructing a narrative space in which difference can be seen and contradiction can be thought. This is the political force of Thirdspace. It offers no utopian solution. Rather, it creates a "thirding" that makes another way of seeing history possible and opens a space in which multiple forms of resistance can be imagined. In the coexistence of confinement and rewriting, and in the tension between repetition and change, unfinishedness itself becomes the starting point of critique and the location of hope.

6. Conclusion

In The Mai, the interweaving of the window and the voice-over reveals a generative relation between narrative and space. The shift in the position of looking turns the gaze into a posture open to reflection, while the reorganization of time juxtaposes personal memory and historical experience within a synchronic field. Together they "produce" a Thirdspace that is at once real

and imagined, constrained and open. Narrative is no longer merely a means of representing events; it becomes a process of generating meaning. In this process, space and narration shape one another, and the formation of female subjectivity can be understood as an ongoing spatial action.

What matters here is that the play's spatial imagination is inseparable from its theatricality. The window is not only a metaphor inside the text; it is a concrete stage device that organizes what can be seen, from where it can be seen, and who becomes visible as subject or object of vision. Likewise, Millie's voice-over is not simply retrospective commentary. Because it is spoken in the theatre before an audience while the remembered scenes are simultaneously materialized or evoked on stage, it turns narration into an event of shared spatial perception. The spectator is repeatedly asked not just to hear a story but to inhabit the unstable relation between scene and recollection, presence and afterlife, family interior and historical horizon. In this sense, Thirdspace in The Mai is never purely conceptual. It is performed.

This perspective of Thirdspace not only extends the theoretical horizon of studies of dramatic narration but also resonates with the cultural turn in Irish theatre in the 1990s. Women playwrights represented by Carr reorganize ways of telling within a tradition long dominated by men and, through spatialized narration, participate in the rewriting of gender and history. Thirdspace is therefore not only a concept for textual analysis but also a way of rethinking narratology itself. Its significance lies precisely in this continuing openness. It shows how literature continues to construct new possibilities of expression and understanding within spaces where openness, becoming, and difference coexist.

Seen in this light, Carr's play also participates in a larger reconfiguration of dramatic form in the late twentieth century. The question is no longer only how drama represents action over time, but how it composes a space in which different histories and subject positions become thinkable together. The Mai does not offer emancipation as a finished destination. Instead, it demonstrates that criticism and hope may begin with the production of a space where inherited images are made strange and where the stories women have been forced to inhabit can be retold from another angle. This is why the play remains important not only to Irish theatre studies but also to broader discussions of narrative theory, feminist criticism, and the cultural politics of space.

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