

**Freeing The Smothered (M)other:  
The Refocalisation of the Reluctant Mother in Modern Irish  
Society as Evinced Through the Works of Anne Enright**

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**Introduction**

Pregnancy and motherhood are life experiences and issues which are explored recurrently throughout the works of Anne Enright. Through her examination of the pregnant body and the figure of the new mother, and her exploration of the effect of pregnancy and birth on the mother, family, community and indeed Irish society, Enright has expanded the representation of the pregnant woman and mother in Irish literature. The works of Anne Enright not only present and explore traditional images of women who are fulfilled and empowered by the experience of pregnancy and motherhood, but more importantly, these works explore the anxieties and difficulties experienced by the Other Mother in Irish society; namely reluctant or ambivalent mothers; those who do not choose motherhood, or who, through motherhood, experience feelings of loneliness, occupation, a loss of physical or social identity or even post-natal depression. In 'Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever', Lacan makes the point that all 'language is lent from...otherness and this is why the subject is always a fading thing that runs under the chain of signifiers' (Lacan 2007, 194). This paper will attempt to explore the ways in which other mothers; namely

mothers who do not conform to societal ideals of motherhood, have traditionally faded away or been occluded by traditional Irish signifiers of ideal motherhood, and how Enright's refocalization of pregnancy and motherhood is so important in an Irish socio-cultural context.

In modern Irish society, cultural and societal images of pregnancy create powerful markers of identity for pregnant women or new mothers. Families, communities, the media, and indeed the Irish community of pregnant women and mothers, combine to inundate pregnant women with advice and indeed prescriptions of what they should feel, look like and act throughout pregnancy, and after the birth of the baby. Images of happy and contented mothers abound in women's magazines, television advertisements for baby products and websites aimed at pregnant women and new mothers, with pregnant women expected to feel contented and all-consumed by the experience of pregnancy. These influences, it can be argued, are compounded by traditional stereotypes centring on the Irish mother. The special protection and status afforded in the Irish Constitution to Irish women and mothers in the home, compounded by the widespread adherence to the cult of the Virgin Mary in the twentieth century have inculcated an image of motherhood in the Irish psyche, one which is associated the Irish Mother with sacrifice, undying love and utter contentment in her role as wife and mother. Nancy Scheper-Hughes makes the point in *Broken Fiddles and Hardened Hearts in Rural Ireland* that:

The patient, long-suffering, Irish mother is immortalized in national ballads, revolutionary poetry, and Celtic myth... Represented in the ubiquitous statue or painting of the Immaculate (and bleeding) Heart of Mary, the Irish mother is, like her, a veritable "mater dolorosa". In village pubs where after rounds of drinking, even when religion and the Holy Father himself can become the subjects of mocking jest, motherhood remains publicly sacrosanct (Scheper-Hughes 2004, 32).

Despite the decline in the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the twenty-first century, Rozsika Parker makes the point in *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, that despite attempts to mock, demystify, reframe, turn our backs on or deconstruct the Madonna image of maternity, it is 'too deeply embedded in our psychocultural life to be eradicated' or dismissed (Parker 2010, 35). In such a culture, little room is afforded for women to express negative or ambivalent feelings and emotions about pregnancy or motherhood and as a result the Other Mother, the reluctant mother, is smothered by traditional ideals of motherhood, denying them a space in modern Irish society. Enright's fiction provides a space for this reluctant or smothered (m)other to be visualised and represented, by outlining the complexities of emotion that surround pregnancy and motherhood as an experience, and by voicing taboo concerns and feelings experienced by pregnant women and mothers in modern Irish society. In doing so, Enright's representation of the female pregnant body can be seen as an attempt to, as Luce Irigaray puts it, 'resubmit' the female pregnant presence within an Irish societal paradigm (Irigaray 1985, 76). Irigaray posits that by resubmitting herself, woman can 'try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it' (Irigaray, 1985, 76). Enright in a sense, by focusing on the bodily experience of being pregnant, has resubmitted the pregnant body to Irish society at large for exploration, discussion and debate, making the body itself the focus, as Irigaray states making 'visible...what was supposed to remain invisible' (Irigaray 1985, 76). By making this previously hidden or occluded body visible, and by placing the somatic experience of the private sphere within the ambit of the symbolic order of the public sphere, the figure of the smothered or reluctant mother, and the reality of their presence in Irish society can be explored.

### **The pain of the non-connection**

Many of Enright's pregnant characters or characters with children display traits or emotions during pregnancy and motherhood which would arguably define them as the Other Mother in Irish society. One of these emotions, which could be considered taboo and unspoken of in relation to motherhood in Ireland, is the fear of not connecting or bonding with a baby. Cultural norms and stereotypes centring on mothers and babies presuppose a naturally close and comfortable bond between mothers and babies. As a result, women who have difficulty connecting initially or naturally with their baby after giving birth, either because they are suffering from postnatal depression, or simply because bonding is initially difficult, can be made to feel abnormal and consequently, may feel unable to voice their concerns and feelings. Harriet Lerner discusses this in *The Mother Dance* stating that:

the fantasy about how a mother is supposed to feel haunts almost every mother. Because the myth of the "good mother" denies the power of real-life ambivalence - of love and hate - mothers feel ashamed of acknowledging their "unacceptable feelings" and their limits...When taboo feelings can't be acknowledged, not even to our own selves, a mother's self-regard is likely to plummet (Lerner 2001, 250).

Thus, maternal ambivalence is deemed both personally intolerable and socially unacceptable, impelling women suffering from these ambivalent feelings to remain silent on this issue, forcing them into painting a picture of a maternal relationship which is always healthy and more importantly 'normal'. In *Torn In Two*, Rozsika Parker discusses societies inability to accept maternal ambivalence stating that:

Society's wariness of maternal ambivalence, fuelled perhaps by infantile fears of loss, defended against by the idealisation or denigration of mothers, provides a context which inflates maternal guilt, rendering ambivalence at times unmanageable (Parker 2010, 24-25).

By provoking profound guilt, and by extension silence, in women in relation to this issue, reluctant or depressed mothers are smothered into silence and are defined clearly as other within an Irish paradigm. In *Making Babies*, Enright, through an intensely personal description of her own experience of motherhood, opens up this issue and voices some of the more unacceptable feelings that mothers can feel, if only fleetingly, after giving birth. Directly after the birth of her first child, Enright notes that the baby ‘opened her eyes for the first time...blinked and found my eyes. It was a very suspicious, grumpy look, and I was devastated’ (Enright 2005, 37). In this one sentence, Enright challenges the normative view that every mother must look at their baby and feel an instant bond and connection. Rozsika Parker makes the point that this instantaneous bond is presupposed as women ‘carry babies for nine months within a culture which represents the postnatal mother-child social relationship as if it replicated the intrauterine state of antenatal union’ (Parker 2010, 43-44). While many (and arguably most) women do instantly bond with their baby, Enright’s work challenges Irish society to recognise the complicated emotions surrounding the birth of a baby, and to engage with the myriad of ways in which a woman can bond with her child. Later in the memoir, Enright goes on to outline some of the more unacceptable feelings that she has in relation to the baby:

Once, maybe twice a day, I get an image of terrible violence against the baby. Like a flicker in the corner of my eye, it lasts for a quarter of a second, maybe less. Sometimes it is me who inflicts this violence, sometimes it is someone else. Martin says it is all right - it is just her astonishing vulnerability that works strange things in my head. But I know it is also because I am trapped, not just by her endless needs, but also by the endless, mindless love I have for her. It is important to stay on the right side of a love like this. For once, I am glad I am an older mother. I don't panic. I put a limit on the images that flash across my mind's eye. I'm allowed two per day, maybe three. If I get more than that, then it's off to the doctor for the happy pills (Enright 2005, 54).

Once again, Enright engages with what can be regarded as a taboo subject within Irish society; that of ambivalent or even negative feelings towards an infant. Through the frank interaction between Enright about her husband about these feelings, she opens the subject for discussion within Irish society. It is by voicing these feelings that they are given a reality, and that the reality of women who agonise and fear that having these feelings will make them a 'bad', or Other, Mother can be revealed. Also, by admitting to these feelings, Enright continues to narrow the gap in the distinction between mother and Other Mother in Irish society. Again the distinct dichotomy is challenged by the reality that even content and happy mothers contend with negative and confusing emotions during the initial stages of motherhood.

For some women, the fear and anxiety centring on these fleeting feelings is compounded by postnatal depression. Once an unmentionable subject from which women suffered in silence and ignorance, postnatal depression is now recognised as a legitimate and difficult condition, profoundly affecting a woman's ability to bond and connect with her baby. Enright engages with the feelings and anxieties associated with postnatal depression in *Making Babies* when she speaks to a woman suffering from postnatal depression about her son:

'I wasn't feeding him fast enough and he knocked the spoon out of my hand, and the look he gave me was absolutely evil.' This woman has postnatal depression - but still, what was that look? I want to know. I want to know what message passed between the baby and his depressed mother (Enright 2005, 147).

Enright voices the pain and loneliness of women with postnatal depression, who feel alienated and unconnected from their baby, but also from society because of these feelings. Like the reluctant mother, women suffering from postnatal depression can be posited as Other Mothers by Irish society. This type of

problematic motherhood does not correspond to the conventional societal view of motherhood as a positive and joyful experience, and so, in order to protect the coveted positive image of motherhood, these ‘other mothers’ must be excluded, silenced and occluded. This extract also calls into question the validity and weight that is accorded to the statements or anxieties of women who suffer from postnatal depression. When the woman insists that the child’s look was ‘absolutely evil’, the writer’s instant reaction is to focus on the fact that the woman was suffering from postnatal depression. That automatic focus on postnatal depression as both an explanation for the woman’s statement and marker of her identity instantly posits her as Other, and in many ways negates her anxiety, reducing it to a mere symptom of her condition. In *The Gathering* too, it could be argued that Enright makes an oblique reference to the possible consequences of postnatal depression. While it is never stated that the Veronica’s mother suffered from postnatal depression, it could be argued that there are similarities that can be drawn between her behaviour and the suffering and symptoms of postnatal depression. Her inability to remember her children’s names on occasion, (signalling perhaps a difficulty in bonding with her children), and the toll that multiple pregnancies have had upon her mental health, are but two examples. Veronica outlines her mother’s difficulties when she states that:

I don't know what they called these episodes. Single women had ‘breakdowns’, but in those days married women just had more babies, or no more babies. Mammy got going again, anyway, with Alice in 1967... and right after that came Ivor and Jem. I suppose the unfairness of twins might have provoked her final bout of ‘nerves’. Certainly there were always tranquillisers in there among the Brufen and warfarin on her saucer of pills, and she has been, as long as I have known her, subject to the shakes, and inexplicable difficulties, and sudden weeps (Enright 2007, 46-47).

The very fact that Veronica cannot identify or name her mother’s illness/difficulties is indicative of the extent of the negation of such issues in mid to late twentieth century Ireland. Veronica’s mother is posited as Other by her

children from their youth, her depression creating an emotional distance between her and her offspring which is never really bridged. Similarly, in *The Gathering*, Enright explores, if only in a latent manner, the capacity of mothers, when suffering from postnatal depression or other unbearable stresses, to contemplate or indeed commit an act of violence against a child. In one scene in the novel the main protagonist Veronica and her brother Liam tell stories about their childhood. In the midst of these stories they focus upon the death of their brother Stevie as a baby, stating that:

My older baby brother Stevie - the one who died when he was two - 'She did it,' said Liam. 'She put a pillow over his face,' and we'd laughed our heads off. 'Well, come on, she was pregnant all the time. All the time.' 'Wouldn't you?' (Enright 2007, 94).

While the story is most likely intended by the characters to be a darkly humorous mocking of their mother, it must be considered within the context of the novel and in relation to Veronica's mother's life. When one considers Veronica's mother's multiple pregnancies, and their obvious effect on her mental health, it could be said that her children are aware of and voice her capacity to be overwhelmed by the combination of her maternal responsibilities to an ever-growing brood of children, and her attempt to maintain her mental health and well-being. Through this tongue-in-cheek passage, Enright raises the ugly spectre of maternal violence in the face of extreme anxiety and/or depression, a capacity which remains intolerable and to a certain extent occluded within modern Irish society. Their mother's questionable mental well-being could be considered the reason why the Hegarty children adopted the mantra in childhood of 'Don't tell Mammy':

It was the mantra of our childhoods, or one of them... If something broke or was spilt, if Bea did not come home or Mossie went up to live in the attic, or Liam dropped acid, or Alice had sex, or Kitty bled buckets into her new school uniform... None of the messages relayed: the whispered conference in the hall, *Don't tell Mammy*, because 'Mammy' would - what? Expire?



‘Mammy’ would worry. Which seemed fine to me. It was, after all, of her own making, this family. It had all come - singly and painfully - out of her. And my father said it more than anyone; level, gallant, *There’s no need to tell your mother now*, as if the reality of his bed was all the reality that this woman should be asked to bear (Enright 2007, 9).

Veronica’s father’s strident assertion that ‘There’s no need to tell your mother now’, automatically positions Veronica’s mother as the smothered (m)other in the family, overburdened with her responsibilities as life and care giver to an ever growing brood of children, and isolated from them all by the depression and anxieties that threaten to overwhelm her (Enright 2007, 9).

### **Loneliness**

Related to the anxiety of not connecting or bonding with a baby, Enright also explores the loneliness that can accompany motherhood, feelings which arguably are largely unconsidered by society and which are far removed from the stereotypical view of pregnancy and motherhood. Many of Enright’s mothers feel positioned as Other by their family, society and even by their baby in the wake of childbirth and the initial years of their motherhood. This feeling of alienation and otherness is evident in *What Are You Like?*, when Evelyn, Berts’ wife, ruminates on the complexities of motherhood. She states that she ‘had wanted to make a go of her children, to make friends of them, but they were all strangers to her still. If you thought about it, it was the loneliest job of them all’ (Enright 2001, 76). Evelyn experiences here, as all mothers must, the negotiation of the ‘lived experience of motherhood with the maternal ideal’, the aspirations that mothers have in relation to the experience of motherhood and the relationship and bond that they will develop with their children (Parker 2010, 41). Enright explores the feeling of alienation that mothers can feel from their babies, in the wake of childbirth. In *Making Babies*, she describes the disconcerting feeling that she herself experienced when the baby looks at her from another person’s arms:

The baby sits in her father's arms and looks over at me, like I am a stranger, walked in off the street. Oh, that blank stare. It makes me laugh, and go over to her, and take her back from him.

Silly baba.

When I have her safe, I look at Martin, and sometimes I recognise the wan feeling that men get, after a baby is born. I spend the next while renegotiating this new, triangular love, with its lines of affection and exclusion. I try to make it whole. The thing I have to remember is that love is, in general, a good thing (though it often feels terrible, to me). I can see why people panic about all this: they panic about their partners being lost to them, or they panic about their babies being lost to them (Enright 2005, 57).

One could argue that the biological connection that the mother experiences when carrying the foetus during pregnancy is so vital and interconnected, that after the birth of the child, the mother can feel a sense of loss, isolation and loneliness. The perceived blank stare that Enright's daughter displays to her mother disconcerts her, emphasising the fact that they are now separate individuals, no longer a unified presence. This initial separation of mother from the child in the aftermath of childbirth profoundly changes the prior relationship between mother and baby. The previous intensely private and interconnected dualistic identity which the pregnant woman experienced, what Enright terms the 'motherandchild' presence (Enright 2005, 20), has been replaced by two separate and distinct identities, which could posit the mother as Other in relation to the new life which she has brought forth. Their relationship modulates from one in which the foetus is literally a part of the self, to a more separate engagement with an infant which, after childbirth, has its own distinct identity in society. In the aftermath of this profound change in this relationship, the mother could arguably see herself, and be seen by society, as a new Other, an Other to this being that once was part of the self, but which now has separated distinctly and permanently. By admitting, in the above passage, that childbearing brings with it exclusionary element, which effect both mothers and fathers, Enright widens the

representation of parenthood, again acknowledging that the accommodation of an infant into a household and a relationship has a profound effect upon both men and women. Enright touches upon these feelings of loneliness when she states that, for her own daughter:

The world is a circus and I am her trapeze, her stilts, her net. Not just mother, also platform and prosthesis. I'm not sure I feel like a person, anymore. I think I feel a little used (Enright 2005, 60).

By assessing this shifting identity of mother and child in the initial stages of development, Enright examines the way in which familial and cultural dictates can contribute to feelings of loneliness and otherness that a mother may experience. Enright analyses these influences in *Making Babies*, when she discusses how family and friends commented on who her baby looks like. When she was told that she's 'the image of her father', Enright's response is to state that 'I'm not a woman,'... 'I'm a photocopier'' (Enright 2005, 60). This reaction and choice of words is significant. By associating giving birth with the act of photocopying, Enright explores the theory of producing an Other which is in many ways a copy of the self. The fact that the baby was associated, or considered to be identical to her father, serves to further posit the mother as Other, a vessel through which to bring forth a copy of the self, but not necessarily the female self.

### **Feeling Occupied**

While many of Enright's novels explore feelings of alienation and non-connection with a baby, her work also engages with feelings of inescapability and occupation in the wake of pregnancy. Far from presenting a unified picture of pregnancy as a normal and wonderful experience for all women, Enright's writing exposes the feeling of occupation which some women experience during pregnancy. Upon asking a woman 'What is it like being pregnant?' in *Making Babies*, the woman's response was "It is like having an alien inside you". Enright acknowledges the

complexities of this profound experience, stating that ‘We do not choose, sometimes, to be occupied by this other creature, and this is one reason why women find pregnancy unsettling’ (Enright 2005, 11). These feelings of occupation can be linked to Hélène Cixous’ assertion in *Sorties* that ‘woman is always on the side of passivity’ (Cixous 2000, 265). Whether becoming pregnant is a choice or not for a woman, once pregnant, a woman, in certain ways, loses control over the changes that her body will undergo. She becomes a passive passenger in a rapidly changing body, occupied by a being over which she has little or no control. Rozsika Parker reinforces this point, stating that prior to birth, ‘one negative image a woman maintains of the foetus is often that of ‘parasite’ (Parker 2010, 235). It must be stated that Enright does not always view this state of occupation as a negative feeling. In *What’s Left of Henrietta Lacks?*, Enright talks frankly of her own pregnancy, stating ‘There is a part of me now that is entirely happy. I sit and listen to my own blood, or to someone’s blood’ (Enright 2000, 8). Again this feeling of occupation is evident, although Enright as the occupied body, seems perfectly content with her situation. By outlining the positive and, more importantly the negative feelings associated with feelings of occupation during pregnancy, Enright once again makes visible the Other Mother in Irish society, the smothered mother who can feel, at times, overwhelmed by the residence of another life inside her. These overwhelming feelings are outlined by Lilly Purves, who explains how:

A friend of that era...once said, ‘I think I’ve been hijacked’. That rang true for me too. Here is this tiny terrorist inside you saying, ‘You will go to the baby clinic! Lay off the booze! Leave that cigarette alone! Do your breathing exercises! Clench that pelvic floor!’ (Purves 1992).

By voicing concerns such as these, Enright widens the representation of the reluctant or other mother in modern Irish society.

### **Anxieties in relation to the change in the body and identity**

Another anxiety that concerns both reluctant mothers and women who decide to have children is the changes to the body and identity that a woman will face during pregnancy. Arguably, pregnancy is a time where a woman faces a dramatic bodily change which can raise issues relating to self-identity, self-esteem and body image. Enright touches upon the issue of bodily change and the loss of identity during pregnancy in *Making Babies* when she states:

If Kafka had been a woman, then Gregor Samsa would not have turned into an insect, he would not have had to. Gregor would be Gretel and she would wake up one morning pregnant. She would try to roll over and discover she was stuck on her back. She would wave her little hands uselessly in the air (Enright 2005, 17).

This point emphasises the degree to which a woman's body is transformed during pregnancy and the loss of control over the body which must be faced in order to bring life into the world. One could argue that motherhood can be considered an 'otherhood' in Irish society, with pregnancy as a state of being which profoundly affects the way a woman is identified by family, community and society in general. It is the bodily changes which pregnant women, like Gregor, experience, which posits them as other in society and profoundly affect the way in which they interact with society. In many ways, pregnant women can feel a profound loss of social identity while pregnant. This is outlined in Enright's novel *The Forgotten Waltz* when the main protagonist Gina refers to Fiachra's heavily pregnant wife as Fiachra's 'Fat Flower' (Enright 2011, 90). It is interesting to note that Gina is never sure of the woman's actual name 'Dahlia, or Delia, or Delilah'; in reality this woman has been reduced to an unidentified pregnant body, Fiachra's 'Fat Flower' (Enright 2011, 84, 90). The association of the woman with a flower emphasises her silence, once again linking the pregnant woman to Gregor Samsa through a shared inability to communicate with society

at large. When she tries to communicate her anxieties to Gina, Gina's response is revealing:

She pulled me in over her belly - literally pulled me by the cloth of my top - and said, in a low voice:  
'Why is my husband talking to that girl?'  
'What?' I said. 'Would you give over.'  
'No really,' she said. 'Does he know her?'  
She was crying. When did that start?  
I said, 'Would you like something to eat, maybe?' and she said, 'Oh. Food.'  
Like she had never thought of doing *that* before (Enright 2011, 83).

Gina simply refuses to engage with the woman's concerns, instead brushing them aside whilst simultaneously trying to distract her by fulfilling a bodily need. When Samsa turns into an insect in *The Metamorphosis*, he is rendered unable to communicate with his family or indeed wider society. The pregnant woman, like Samsa, has thus become the Other in society, a being with whom communication and identification is problematic. It is significant that soon after this exchange, Gina remarks that she wanted to 'get away' from Fiachra's wife, 'but it didn't seem possible (Enright 2011, 83). The pregnant woman has thus become an inescapable yet unnameable presence in the room, a being that the other guests cannot escape from, yet one whom they do not wish to engage with.

### **Loss of Physical Identity**

The exploration of pregnant woman as bodily other is an issue which Enright engages with throughout her work. She challenges the stereotypical notion that all women and, by extension, women's bodies, naturally accept and embrace pregnancy and the changes that it brings to the body:

It is assumed that our bodies will 'know', even if we don't, what pregnancy is like and what it is for; that we are, on some cellular level, wise, or even keen on the reproductive game. But I do not know how such cellular knowledge might happen, or where it might inhere (Enright 2005, 11).

In her short story *Shaft*, the main protagonist, a pregnant woman, ruminates upon her husband's response to her voicing concerns about her changing body:

'It's perfectly natural,' he says, when I tell him the trouble I am having with the veins in my legs... But sometimes I think he means, *We're just animals, you know*. And sometimes I think he means, *You in particular. You are just an animal* (Enright 2009b, 145).

Both the husband and wife's response to her anxiety are important to consider. The husband's statement that these changes are 'natural' implies to the pregnant woman that her anxieties are groundless, and that these bodily changes should be accepted happily. This response, though most likely well meant, has the effect of negating the pregnant woman's anxiety and fear about her changing body image. The pregnant woman herself interprets her husband's response as reducing her to a mere animalistic Other. By challenging assertions that changes in the body during pregnancy should be automatically accepted by women as natural and unquestioned, Enright explores the way in which bodily changes, and societal reactions to such changes, can contribute to feelings of otherness amongst pregnant women.

In *Shaft*, Enright also engages with the way in which the pregnant body is viewed by society and how this view challenges the self-identity of the mother. While sharing a lift with an American man, the pregnant woman becomes aware of his increasing interest in her body. His intense focus on her body, but more particularly on her stomach elicits a powerful emotional response from the woman:

I would prefer it if he looked at me, that's all - the American. Even if I was sliding down the mirrored wall in front of him, even if I was giving birth on the floor. I would prefer it if you looked at the person that I am, the person you see in my eyes (Enright 2009b, 144).

The American's intense focus on the woman's stomach, in reality upon the child that she is carrying, can be seen to negate the woman's own self-identity.

She has become what Anne Enright defines as ‘motherandchild’ presence, and her identity has undergone a dynamic shift (Enright 2005, 20). To be no longer considered as a solitary identity, but as a dual one, profoundly affects a person’s previous self identity, forcing them to create a new Other identity which incorporates the new life within. The focus of the pregnant woman’s plea also interestingly shifts in this extract. She begins by wishing that ‘he’, the American, would look beyond her bump at the person that she is, but significantly she ends the quote by pleading to an unnamed ‘you’. One could argue that though the woman is angry that the man (he) cannot see beyond her bump, in reality she is angry at society in general (you) for collectively engaging with her primarily as ‘motherandchild’ presence (Enright 2005, 20). Enright’s very specific choice of personal pronoun in this passage, enables her to utilise a personal and intimate experience between two people to open a discussion centring on societal reactions and reception of the pregnant woman, and the ways in which women feel a distinct loss of societal identity when pregnant. These feelings of anger and frustration are expressed in an anonymous email to the Gerry Ryan show in 2009. The woman wrote:

‘Hi Gerry, I’m twenty-seven weeks pregnant and I’ve noticed that when you’re pregnant, here in Ireland anyway, nobody greets you to your face anymore. They greet your bump. You get ‘hi, how are you’, while they look directly, not at your face, but at your bump’ (Ryan 2009).

Interestingly, in response to the woman’s concerns about being socially imbibed as ‘a pregnant woman’ rather than simply ‘a woman’, and society’s fascination with the pregnancy bump, Gerry Ryan asks ‘is it because women become different creatures when they are pregnant?’ (Ryan 2009). This comment is indicative of how radically society can construe women’s identity to have changed during pregnancy, leading to a situation where women crave a societal re-identification with them as women, and not simply as carriers of unborn progeny. Both the pregnant woman in ‘Shaft’, and the anonymous emailer on the



Gerry Ryan show, attempt, as Irigaray states ‘not to submit to a desubjectivized social role, that of the mother...which confines us to a mere function’ (1991, 42). In *The Bodily Encounter with the Mother*, Irigaray makes the point ‘Have fathers ever been asked to renounce being men? Citizens? We do not have to renounce being women in order to be mothers’ (1991, 43). The pregnant woman in ‘Shaft’ and the anonymous emailer, in their own ways, are attempting to understand and circumvent societal pressure to renounce their identity as woman in order to appropriate their identity as mother.

This crisis of identity can be closely linked to Jacques Lacan’s conception of the form of the body as given to a person as a *gestalt* ‘that is, in an exteriority in which...this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all’, appears to a person as the contour of their stature (2006, 76). The fact that, in Lacanian terms, the *gestalt* is more constitutive than constituted is significant when one considers the changing identity of the pregnant woman. While it is clear that the woman’s body changes irrespective of outside forces during pregnancy, it could be argued that the way in which she is viewed, and the way in which her new bodily form is interpreted, both by the woman herself and wider society, can be deemed constitutive. While admittedly, Lacan’s ‘gestalt’ traditionally refers to a misrecognition of a unified self in the mirror, a misrecognition necessary in the process of subject formation, this paper seeks to extrapolate this Lacanian theory into a social context, by utilising the figure of the Other as a societal mirror. The Other ‘motherandchild’ presence (Enright 2005, 20) has been constituted by many factors, including the community, Irish society, the media, the courts and to an extent the church, and so upon becoming pregnant, women arguably are given a new *gestalt* through which to interpret their new role in life as pregnant woman. Enright touches upon this point in *Shaft*. When the pregnant woman realises she is being watched, she instantly modulates her behaviour to what she feels is expected of her as a pregnant woman: ‘I blinked a bit and smiled my most

pregnant smile, all drifty and overwhelmed' (Enright 2009, 142). This other identity, though transient, has a considerable effect on the woman's self identity. If, as Lacan suggests, the *gestalt* symbolises the 'mental permanence' of the I, then the effect of pregnancy and motherhood on the self identity of women cannot be overlooked (2006, 76). Lacan points out that this *gestalt* is:

replete with the correspondences that unite the I with the statue onto which man projects himself, the phantoms that dominate him, and the automaton with which the world of his own making tends to achieve fruition in an ambiguous relation (2006, 76-77).

In the same way, the *gestalt* of the pregnant body could be said to be created from the internal and external maternal forces that shape our society, including personal, familial and societal projections of pregnancy. Irish society, therefore, can be seen to create the ideal Other *gestalt* which a pregnant woman aspires to, which is an important theory to consider when discussing self-identity amongst pregnant Irish women.

### **Pregnancy as Consuming the Body**

Another anxiety which is touched upon in Enright's fiction is the notion of pregnancy as a consuming force. Closely related to the issue of the illegality of contraception, this issue was arguably a real and intense fear for many Irish mothers until 1979, and the introduction of the Health (Family Planning) Act which legalised the sale of contraceptives for 'bona fide' purposes, 'for family planning purposes or for adequate medical reasons and in appropriate circumstances' (Office of the Attorney General 1979). These fears manifest themselves in the literature of Anne Enright in *What Are You Like?* and in *The Gathering*. In *What Are You Like?* Berts' wife Anna develops a brain tumour while pregnant, and her family, the medical profession and Irish society in general allow her body to be consumed by pregnancy and disease:

It was then that Berts told her about his wife on the bed, the child filling her stomach and the tumour filling her brain. How they wheeled her down to the operating theatre, her pelvis surging and her face blank. How they took out the child and turned off the machines, and waited (Enright 2001, 14).

Berts admits to himself that 'he would do the same again, if he had to', stating that the 'baby would live and that is what babies are for. She would die, because people do' (Enright 2001, 7). Anna's consumption by pregnancy and disease, then, is seen as a natural and unchangeable event, with mother being sacrificed for the sake of the child. Anna, and by extension, Irish mothers of her time, are seen in a sense, to be living incubators, an identification and representation which profoundly affects their ability to be viewed as distinct identities, separate from the baby. Anna is viewed primarily as a pregnant woman, and only secondarily as a medically ill woman. This enables Berts, the doctors and by implication Irish society, to posit her as an Other identity, one which can be denied treatment for the sake of the baby. This othering of the pregnant woman is evident in the fact that Anna is not consulted about this decision. Berts himself is aware that his wife is sacrificed despite the fact there 'wasn't a part of his wife that had wanted to die. There wasn't a single cell of her that had wanted to die' (Enright 2001, 10). Enright's representation of Anna in *What Are You Like?* can be seen, therefore, as an individualistic exploration of a national ideology of Othering the mother. Article 41.2 of the Irish constitution, which recognises the special position of the woman in the home, can be seen to posit woman and mother as a distinct other in Irish society, in need of protection and regulation. Similarly article 40.3 subsection three of the constitution's acknowledgement of the 'right to life of the unborn...with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother', situates the body of the mother as distinct and other in relation to Irish women's bodies in general (Department of the Taoiseach 2012). This othering of the body and identity of the mother by Irish society can be seen in these instances to aid in the control and regulation of the pregnant body.

Enright also focuses on the issue of being consumed by pregnancy in *Making Babies* when she remembers women she knew in her youth who were continually pregnant:

I did sums: the mother of a school friend who had had twenty-two pregnancies, eleven of which had come to term. She would look up from her plate, surrounded by bottles of pills, and say, 'Oh...Hello...' as though trying to figure out if you had come out of her or someone else. Her husband was mad about her, you could still see it, and her children, with the exception of the eldest boys, were complete strangers (Enright 2005, 24).

In this case, the focus shifts from woman being bodily consumed by pregnancy to being mentally consumed by it. This is an issue with which she continues to engage in *The Gathering* where Veronica's mother has become mentally vacant, and Veronica and her siblings feel that her multiple pregnancies were a main cause of this forgetfulness. Veronica states that her mother 'had twelve children', the 'holes in her head are not her fault' (Enright 2007, 7). Thus, Veronica's mother loses her identity to pregnancy to a certain degree. Veronica acknowledges this when she states:

...she seems to disappear, and when I look, I see only the edges. I think I would pass her in the street, if she ever bought a different coat. If my mother committed a crime there would be no witnesses - she is forgetfulness itself (Enright 2007, 3).

Multiple pregnancies have stripped Veronica's mother of her stable sense of self, positing her as a vague and fragmented Other, both to her children and indeed to Irish society. Indeed Veronica's mother is perhaps the ultimate testament to how motherhood can become 'otherhood', as her very existence and identity within the home and society can be seen to have been utterly transformed by pregnancy.

In this paper, I have argued that through a representation of the multifaceted nature of and emotions surrounding pregnancy and motherhood, Anne Enright's novels provide the reader with a unique engagement with the occluded Other or smothered mothers within Irish society. The reluctant mother to date, one could

argue, has struggled to find representation in modern Irish literature, and Enright's novels can be viewed as an attempt to resituate the reluctant, Other Mother within a societal gaze, and to open the debate on the problematic nature of identity during pregnancy and motherhood. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous makes the point that through writing, woman can be torn away:

from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any...for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing ... (Cixous 1976, 880).

Enright's novels, through an exploration of feelings of self-reproach, fear and ambivalence in relation to pregnancy, aid in the exorcism of feelings of profound guilt in relation to the inability to conform to societal and cultural ideals of motherhood. In *Sorties*, Cixous warns that:

There is no such thing as 'destiny', 'nature', or essence, but living structures, caught up, sometimes frozen within historicocultural limits which intermingle with the historical scene to such a degree that it has long been impossible and is still difficult to think or even to imagine something else (Cixous 2000, 268).

Enright's novels attempt to challenge the historicocultural limits of motherhood and pregnancy within Irish society, allowing for a more complex, but arguably more realistic, expression of the emotions, identities and experiences surrounding pregnancy and motherhood in modern Irish society. Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*, sums up the complexities of such emotions and experiences stating:

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence, the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves and blissful gratification (Rich 1977, 21).

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