

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

“THE GRANITE CEILING”: DISCOURSES OF GENDER AND OPPRESSION IN THE POETRY OF
PAULA MEEHAN

GINNELLE SROKA
Spring 2012

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English
with honors in English.

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Jessica O'Hara
Lecturer in English, Director of LA 101H
Thesis Supervisor

Jack Selzer
Barry Director of the Paterno Fellows Program
Professor of English
Second Reader

Lisa Sternlieb
Professor of English
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College

ABSTRACT

This thesis strives to provide contextual and critical analysis of a selection of Irish poet Paula Meehan's poetry in light of her personal and canonical struggles with oppression and exclusion. The project is divided into two separate sections under which the poems are categorized: motherhood and influence, and the creation of poetry. The poems chosen in these sections offer insight into Meehan's views on these subjects and how those views are directly linked to the oppressions surrounding the female voice in Irish poetic canon. This thesis argues that the resistance to outwardly repressive forces is an integral part of Meehan's creative process and analyzes how this resistance has shaped her poetry. Examination of these influences and their link to her development as a poet also has significant implications for a minority in any poetic canon by revealing the effects of repression and exclusion. Though this project observes that oppression certainly affects poetry, it also proves that the poet has the ability to affect oppression.

CONTENTS

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Preface.....	1
Introduction.....	8
Preface to Poems	13
Theme 1: Motherhood and Domesticity.....	14
<i>Mysteries of the Home: Influence in Poetry on Motherhood and the Domestic</i>	25
I. Making room for influence.....	25
II. The Pattern of Resistance.....	28
III. The Influence of Absences.....	34
IV. The Search for Influence	37
Theme 2: On Poetry and Creation	46
On Poetry and Creation: The Conception of Poetry and Poetry as Conception.....	53
I. The Power of Procreation	53
II. The Physicality of Poetry	55
III. “the peace of this empty page”: The Image of Contentment in Pre-writing	57
IV. “A sex spell”: Inspiration as a Sexual Encounter	58
V. “A boy turns”: Pregnancy and the Conception of the Poem	60
VI. Procreation as Creation: The subversion of Catholicism.....	62
VII. Rethinking and Resisting Tradition	65
CONCLUSION: From Muse to Creator	67
Paula Meehan Interview 6/14/11 Allihies, Ireland.....	74
Bibliography & References.....	A

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Jessica O'Hara for introducing me to Irish poetry and literary theory, and painstakingly working with me through every step of this process. I could not have asked for a better or more dedicated thesis advisor, mentor, and friend. This would not exist without her.

I am also grateful to Jack Selzer for his support and expertise. To the Paterno Fellows Program and Schreyer Honors College for funding my research abroad.

Special thanks to Paula Meehan for the materials and inspiration for this edition, as well as her availability and encouragement. To Candide Jones and Wake Forest University Press for the permission to reprint the poetry, and Jody Allen Randolph for her assistance and extensive bibliography. Also to Kelley King for the use of her photograph.

I am especially grateful to Kathleen Bichner for reading every tedious draft and for recognizing my love of writing, even before I did.

*Dedicated to my parents:
This is the culmination of 4 years,
thousands of dollars,
and an education that continued what you started.*

PREFACE

– *out of the spurious*

the real, be sure

to know the value of the song

as well as the song's true nature.

–Paula Meehan, “It’s All I Ever Wanted”

Any piece of literary criticism or analysis strives to do as the above quote suggests: to find the “value of the song/ as well as the song’s true nature.” This thesis is no different. The quote’s author, Paula Meehan, is one of the eminent poets in contemporary Irish poetry, and I plan to provide context and analysis of a selection of her poems in an effort to discern how they reflect her development as a poet, and the effects of her contribution to contemporary poetry. In her book *Eavan Boland: A Sourcebook*, Jody Allen Randolph contends that “There are two main reasons to look more closely at the work and emergence of a paradigm-shifting poet” such as Boland, or in this case, Paula Meehan: “the first and primary one is text, the second is context.” (xvi) As Randolph would agree, providing context in addition to the text is essential, especially in the case of female Irish poets. I aim to find the value and the meaning in Paula Meehan’s poetry by doing just that.

The Irish poetic canon is one that has a long and revered tradition. However, it has historically been a male-centered canon, with a conspicuous absence of the female voice in Irish poetry until very recently. As one of Meehan’s contemporaries, Mary O’Malley, poignantly asks in her poem “Tracing,” “what keeps me out, the uncontented daughter?” (Boland/O’Malley, 45) Poetry, both written and oral, is as much a staple in Irish culture as

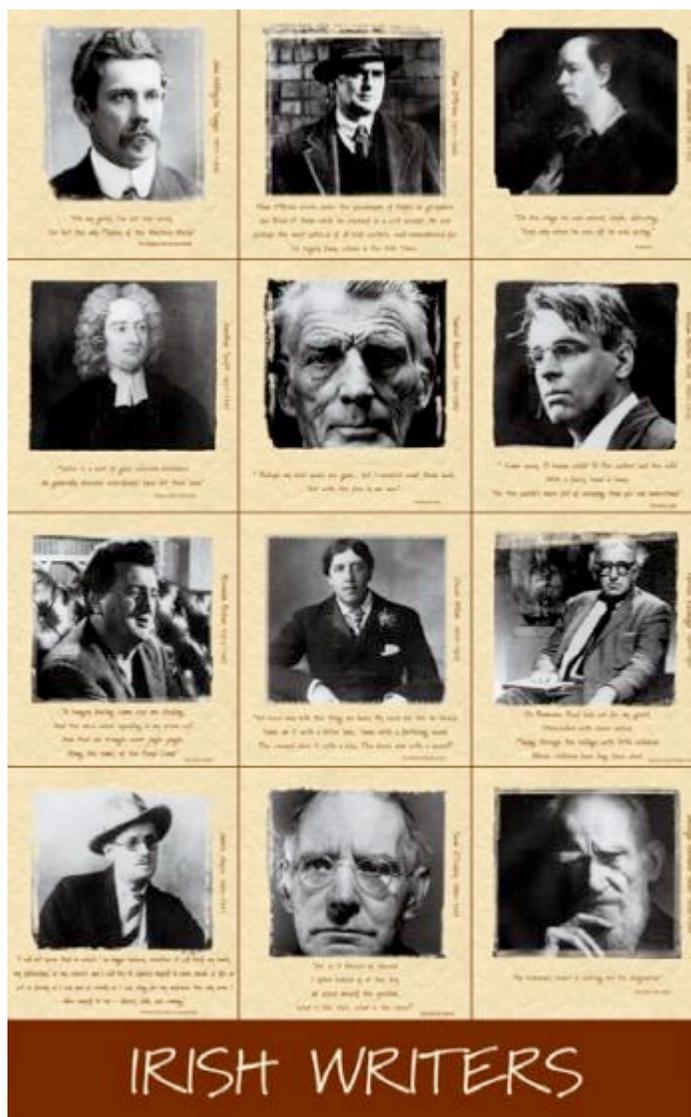
the rolling green hills or the musical boisterous pubs. For half of the population to be virtually absent from the canon represses that minority's poetic authority in a way that permanently alters the development of that voice. Paula Meehan is a part of a generation of poets that is reshaping the face of contemporary Irish poetry, not only in the inclusion of the female poet, but by shifting the definitions and boundaries that had previously governed Irish poetry. However, the female poetic voice still has a long way to come to be equated with the males who have long defined Irish poetry. According to Meehan, it is not so much the metaphorical "glass ceiling" that has kept the Irish women from the canon, "it's a granite ceiling. Each generation of women has to find a way to chip away at it, word by word." (Meehan, Interview)

This fact has not been lost on many readers, writers, and scholars of Irish literature. Long dominated by a patriarchy of poetic authority, the female voice in Irish poetry has only recently begun to gain recognition of an Irish poet, though still with the qualifier of "female." As the poet Eavan Boland stated in her book *Object Lessons*, not only has the female poet's vocation "been defined by a tradition which could never foresee her, but it is construed by men about men, in ways which are poignant, compelling and exclusive." (Allen Randolph, 59)

The *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* was published in 1990 in order to establish a "true history, political and literary, of the island's past and present." (Deane) It was three volumes of what was thought to be a compilation of the greatest works of the greatest authors of Ireland and was meant to be representative of the Irish culture. And the anthology was representative of the Irish identity, especially the authoritatively male perspective that was so deeply ingrained in Irish poetic canon. The books were

immediately attacked for virtually excluding the female Irish voice. The three volumes were overwhelmingly male, and in response to the criticism, the author, Seamus Deane, commissioned another anthology to be written, edited by and inclusive of only women. However, the controversy still prevailed, since most people agreed that a volume issued only as afterthought was still indicative of the authority of the male voice in Irish writing, and in society. Though the Field Day Anthology is the most glaringly obvious example of the minority of the female voice in Irish poetry, there are subtle signs pervasive throughout Irish culture.

Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, in her foreword to the book *Irish Women Writers: An A to Z Guide*, describes noticing what any traveler to Ireland has undoubtedly seen: “the ubiquitous Irish Writers poster, which features the usual suspects: Yeats, O’Casey, Joyce, Kavanagh, and so on.” I not only own the poster, but a postcard copy of the same. However, Fitzgerald-Hoyt recognized what I did not; that “although there is no denying that the writers depicted have shaped, even defined, Irish literary history, all of the featured literary figures are male, as if the designer believed that no Irish woman ever expressed herself in writing.” (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 1-2)



The “ubiquitous”, and male, Irish Writers poster sold in virtually every souvenir shop in Ireland. Source: Amazon.com, Irish Writers Poster

She writes that later she spotted a poster which had made an attempt to rectify the “this injustice of equating Irish literature with male writers: there was a poster titled Irish Women Writers. Yet admirable as it may have been to remind or even inform the populace that there *is* such a creature as an Irish woman writer, it perhaps unconsciously underlines the fundamental problem.” Just as with the Field Day Anthology, the Irish Writers poster

had not been edited to include women, albeit after the fact, but another was added, as an afterthought. It at once calls attention to its previous exclusion, while still omitting women writers from the poster. Fitzgerald-Hoyt commented on this new marginalization, saying, “To state ‘writer’” and assume ‘male’ bespeaks privilege and arrogance; to qualify ‘writer’ with ‘women’ suggests at once defiance and apology.” By adding the tag of “woman” it implies that a consideration of women in the canon of Irish literature can only take place within the confines of their own gender. (Fitzgerald-Hoyt, 1)

Though certainly not the first poet to fight against the exclusivity of the culture of poetry in Ireland, Eavan Boland was instrumental in gaining ground for women in the canon. Recognizing the same disparities and oversights from her own struggle, she published the anthology *Three Irish Poets* in 2003. This compilation features selected poems from Boland’s work, as well as Mary O’Malley and Paula Meehan. The title seems to directly address by omission the very tag that had so long qualified the work of women in Irish poetry. The book was Boland’s idea; an attempt to combat the difficulty she had in finding Meehan and O’Malley’s work in one place. This project is my attempt to put selected poems of Meehan’s work in one place, to offer an easily accessible compilation of her work, and to provide a contextual analysis of the effects of the marginalization of the female voice in Irish poetry.

On an individual level, this being my thesis, it is a project meant to reflect the culmination of four years of an Honors English education. Through this education, I have been introduced to many different genres, authors, and theories, which have given me new perspectives on life and literature. Along the way I developed a love for Irish poetry that only deepened with time. My choice of analysis of the female Irish voice in poetry was a

natural progression, and Paula Meehan was, to me, the perfect candidate. Her poetry and her voice are relatable yet complex, and her style of lyricism allows the reader to become engrossed in the lines and stanzas. Upon receiving a Summer Discovery Grant in 2011, I decided to conduct research in Ireland. There, I was able to meet with Paula Meehan and discuss her poetry and experiences in depth. After talking with her, I knew Meehan would be an integral part of my thesis. While researching the compendiums of Irish literature, I came across Jody Allen Randolph's Sourcebook of Eavan Boland. After some searching, I discovered that other than *Three Irish Poets*, no extensive compilation of Meehan's selected poems exists.

I have chosen thirteen poems that are grouped into two sections. I have categorized these poems by themes: the first is motherhood and influence, and the second the creation of poetry. While the complexity of these poems renders any attempt to assign one single subject or theme to them futile, each one relates to the theme in a distinctive way and reveals insight into Meehan's creative process. The poems I have chosen reflect Meehan's progression as a poet, her views on influence and the creative process, and her use of poetry to subvert the repressive forces that had long kept the female voice from the Irish canon.

The theme of motherhood is one that is pervasive throughout not only Meehan's poetry, but the poetry of many Irish women writers. It has been the subject of many of her most well-known poems and reflects Meehan's complex emotions on the subject. This idea applies not only to Meehan's relationship with her own mother, but to the influence of other female writers and the search for predecessors in a male-dominated field.

Theories about the creation of poetry manifest themselves through much of her work, as well as her feelings towards writing. These poems reveal insight into Meehan's creative process and her views on the poem and the poet. The poetry also creates a distinct metaphor of the creation of poetry to the conception of a child, aligning the poem with the child and the poet with the mother. This analogy puts forth a host of intriguing subversions and shows Meehan's unique ability to reverse the traditional views of women in certain institutions.

The poems I have chosen are ones that I have found to be reflective of both Meehan's work, of the themes above, and of the various contexts which surround the poetry. They are also ones in which I have found the most significance, academically and personally. However, I do not mean this to only be a personal project. Above all, I chose this undertaking in the hopes that this will lay the framework for an extensive sourcebook of Meehan's works, on a larger scale, much in the style of Jody Allen Randolph's *Eavan Boland: A Sourcebook*. Paula Meehan's poetry would then be more accessible to people wishing to study, read or teach Irish poetry. My purpose is to illuminate further just how influential Paula Meehan's work has been in transforming the definition and authority of Irish poetry. Her success has shown that the boundaries that had been thought to previously define Irish poetry could, and should, be abolished. The analysis of her work in these contexts also holds great significance for an examination of the development of poetic authority under duress. While it reveals how oppression shapes poetry, it also shows that the poet has the ability to reshape oppression.

INTRODUCTION

Paula Meehan is currently one of the most influential contemporary poets in Ireland. While the great Irish poetic canon has historically been male-centric, the face of Irish poetry is being changed by the contemporary poets, many of whom are women. Meehan is a recent addition to this line of poets, but has had a profound influence on the redefining of the Irish poetic canon. She has published several books of poetry including *Return and No Blame*, *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, *Pillow Talk*, *Dharmakaya*, *Six Sycamores*, and *Painting Rain*. Her poetry has won various awards including the Butler Literary Award for Poetry presented by the Irish American Cultural Institute and the Denis Devlin Memorial Award. Meehan is a member of Aosdána, a group that was established by the Irish State and Arts Council to honor and support artists who have made considerable contributions to the arts in Ireland, and her poetry has been featured in the Irish Leaving Certification Exam. Possibly Meehan's most important contribution, however, is her effect on the tradition of Irish poetry by viewing Irish poetry through the lens of her dramatically non-Irish experiences.

Born in Dublin in 1955, Paula Meehan was the first of six children. She grew up in the North Inner City section before moving to Finglas, a suburb just north of Dublin. Meehan started Secondary school at St. Michael's Holy Faith Convent, but was expelled for organizing a protest against the administration of the school. After her expulsion, Meehan studied for her Intermediate certification on her own, and completed her Leaving Certification with Whitehouse Senior Girls School.

During secondary school Paula Meehan began to explore her talents for writing by creating lyrics for local bands and publishing her first poems in a youth magazine. She left

home at age 17 to attend Trinity College Dublin, earning degrees in English and History and Classical Civilization. During and after her stint at Trinity, Meehan traveled extensively throughout Europe, living for extended periods of time in Germany and Crete. In 1981, after being offered a teaching fellowship, Meehan returned to school to earn her Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University. There she met Gary Snyder, a beat generation poet whose work focused on nature, ecology and Buddhism. Snyder's work greatly influenced Meehan's, who had been exploring many of these themes in her life and poetry.

Meehan returned to Ireland in 1985, and lived in Leitrim until 1990. In 1990, she moved back to Dublin and met her current partner, poet and playwright Theo Dorgan. During the 1980s her first two collections of poetry, *Return and No Blame* and *Reading the Sky*, were published by a small Dublin publisher called Beaver Row. However, her work did not gain broader attention until the publication of *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* in 1991. Shortly after this collection, *Pillow Talk* was published in 1994, garnering further interest in Meehan's poetry. She has since held positions at Trinity College, Dublin, University College, Dublin and Galway. She conducts workshops and lectures in prisons across Ireland, which served for the inspiration for her play *Cell*. Meehan also retains close ties to the community she grew up in, running arts and education programs in the North Inner City section of Dublin.

Meehan's poetry has been shaped by the Irish heritage she was born into, and the other Hindu, American, and European cultures in which she chose to immerse herself. Her time abroad and exposure to poets such as Gary Snyder resulted in experimentation with poetry that was often dramatically different from what had hitherto been seen as Irish

poetry. In an issue of the now defunct literary journal, *An Sionnach*, Jody Allen Randolph comments on Meehan's exploration of her unique influences, such as "Buddhism, neo-shamanism, bioregional ethics, and holistic healing." Randolph claims that by exploring these different perspectives, "she began her life as a poet by making profoundly original connections between Irish poetry and non-Irish influences, and positioning herself within them." (Allen Randolph, *Text and Context*, 5)

Meehan's poetry has a distinctive melding of inherently "Irish" legends, dialects, and traditions and unique "non-Irish" experiences. While Gary Snyder was one of her most profound influences abroad, in Ireland Meehan found Eavan Boland to be of great significance to her as a female Irish poet. In an interview, Meehan says "Eavan Boland gave a very practical and powerful example of how to integrate what was outside the poem, and troubling it, with the poem itself. Her way of making certainly, but especially her articulation of the pressures she came under as a young poet has been a huge influence." (Allen Randolph, *The Body Politic*, 239-71)

In this way Meehan has, like Eavan Boland before her, not only entered the Irish poetic canon, but reshaped and expanded its definition. As described by Boland, Paula Meehan is "a poet who is also a woman, who is restating the Irish poem in terms of new initiatives and perspectives." (*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, Foreword) In many ways, Paula Meehan broke the mold of what had been the confines of the subset of Irish poetry. Acknowledgment of her work in the category of Irish poetry would require a second look at what it means to consider poems "Irish." Meehan's poetry mirrored much of what Boland's accomplished, in calling attention to a pattern of exclusion and boundaries that seems to govern the Irish poetic canon. Much of her work brings the pattern to light by

breaking it. Now, as a result of poets such as Meehan, a canon that has long been dominated by the male poets of Yeats, Kavanagh, and Heaney is becoming progressively defined by the contemporary female poets.¹

¹ Biographical information from Allen Randolph, *Paula Meehan: Text and Context*, and information given in the Journal Issues 5.1&2 on Paula Meehan in *An Sionnach*.



Paula Meehan in Allihies, Photo Credit: Kelley King Penn State '12

PREFACE TO POEMS

This project is meant not only to provide contextual and textual analysis, but also to present a selection of Paula Meehan's poetry in an accessible way. Here I have included thirteen selected poems that pertain to the topics of analysis that I have chosen: motherhood and domesticity, and poetry and creation. It is my hope that, though on a very small scale, this thesis will eventually serve as the foundation for a larger sourcebook that includes Meehan's poetry and plays, and a contextual background. Presenting the poetry before the analysis is essential in this case, since Meehan is not yet widely taught in American universities. Thus, it provides a degree of familiarity with the exceedingly complex poetry, as well as the ability to easily reference them.

The poems that follow are included in the first section of analysis, categorized by the theme of motherhood and domesticity. These poems are the ones that I have deemed essential to literary criticism of the topic of poetic influence and oppression, as it relates to mother figures. The second group of poems, those that I have chosen on the topic of poetry and creation, begin on page 47. In the same format as the first theme, following these poems is the analysis of Paula Meehan's representations of the creative process of writing poetry. Both of these themes then reflect the effect that oppression and repression has had on Meehan's poetry, the ways in which her creative process was altered as a result, and the effect her poetry has had on these forces.

THEME 1: MOTHERHOOD AND DOMESTICITY

The Pattern

Little has come down to me of hers,
 a sewing machine, a wedding band,
 a clutch of photos, the sting of her hand
 across my face in one of our wars

when we had grown bitter and apart.
 Some say that's the fate of the eldest daughter.
 I wish now she'd lasted till after
 I'd grown up. We might have made a new start

as women without tags like *mother, wife,*
sister, daughter, taken our chances from there.
 At forty-two she headed for god knows where.
 I've never gone back to visit her grave.

*

First she'd scrub the floor with Sunlight soap,
 an armreach at a time. When her knees grew sore
 she'd break for a cup of tea, then start again
 at the door with lavender polish. The smell
 would percolate back through the flat to us,
 her brood banished to the bedroom.

And as she buffed the wax to a high shine
 did she catch her own face coming clear?
 Did she net a glimmer of her true self?
 Did her mirror tell her what mine tells me?

I have her shrug and go on
 knowing history has brought her to her knees.

She's call us in and let us skate around
 in our socks. We'd grow solemn as planets
 in an intricate orbit around her.

She's bending over the crimson cloth,
 the younger kids are long in bed.
 Late summer. Cold enough for a fire,
 she works by fading light
 to remake an old dress for me.
 It's first day back at school tomorrow.

*

'Pure lambswool. Plenty of wear in it yet.

You know I wore this when I went out with your Da.
 I was supposed to be down in a friend's house,
 your Granda caught us at the corner.
 He dragged me in by the hair – it was long as yours then –
 in front of the whole street.
 He called your Da every name under the sun,
 cornerboy, lout; I needn't tell you
 what he called me. He shoved my whole head
 under the kitchen tap, took a scrubbing brush
 and carbolic soap and in ice-cold water he scrubbed
 every speck of lipstick and mascara off my face.
 Christ but he was a right tyrant, your Granda.
 It'll be over my dead body that anyone harms a hair of your head'

*

She must have stayed up half the night
 to finish the dress. I found it airing at the fire,
 three new copybooks on the table and a bright
 bronze nib, St Christopher strung on a silver wire,

as if I were embarking on a perilous journey
 to uncharted realms. I wore that dress
 with little grace. To me it spelt poverty,
 the stigma of the second hand. I grew enough to pass

it on by Christmas to the next in line. I was sizing
 up the world beyond our flat patch by patch
 daily after school, and fitting each surprising
 city street to city square to diamond. I'd watch

the Liffey for hours pulsing to the sea
 and the coming and going of ships,
 certain that one day it would carry me
 to Zanzibar, Bombay, the Land of the Ethiops.

*

There's a photo of her taken in the Phoenix Park
 alone on a bench surrounded by roses
 as if she had been born to formal gardens.
 She stares out as if unaware
 that any human hand held the camera, wrapped
 entirely in her own shadow, the world beyond her
 already a dream, already lost. She's
 eight months pregnant. Her last child.

*

Her steel needles sparked and clacked,
the only other sound a settling coal
or her sporadic mutter
at a hard place in the pattern.
She favored sensible shades:
Moss Green, Mustard, Beige.

I dreamt a robe of a color
so pure it became a word.

Sometimes I'd have to kneel
an hour before her by the fire,
a skein around my outstretched hands,
while she rolled wool into balls.
If I swam like a kite too high
amongst the shadows on the ceiling
or flew like a fish in the pools
of pulsing light, she'd reel me firmly
home, she'd land me at her knees.

Tongues of flame in her dark eyes,
she'd say, 'One of these days I must
teach you to follow a pattern.'

The Exact Moment I Became a Poet
for Kay Foran

was in 1963 when Miss Shannon
 rapping the duster on the easel's peg
 half obscured by a cloud of chalk

said *Attend to your books, girls,
 or mark my words, you'll end up
 in the sewing factory.*

It wasn't just that some of the girls'
 mothers worked in the sewing factory
 or even that my own aunt did,

and many neighbours, but
 that those words 'end up' robbed
 the labour of its dignity.

Not that I knew it then,
 not in those words – labour, dignity.
 That's all back construction,

making sense; allowing also
 the teacher was right
 and no one knows it like I do myself.

But: I *saw* them: mothers, aunts and neighbours
 trussed like chickens
 on a conveyor belt,

getting sewn up the way my granny
 sewed the sage and onion stuffing
 in the birds.

Words could pluck you,
 leave you naked,
 your lovely shiny feathers all gone.

The View from Under the Table

was the best view and the table itself kept the sky
from falling. The world was fringed with red velvet tassels;
whatever play ran in that room the tablecloth was curtains for.
I was the audience. Listen to me laughing. Listen
to me weeping. I was a child. What did I know?

Except that the moon was a porcelain globe and swung from a brass chain. O
that wasn't the moon at all. The moon was my true love. Oak was my roof and
under the table no one could see you. My granny could see me.
Out, she'd say. Out. And up on her lap the smell of kitchen and sleep.
She'd rock me. She'd lull me. No one was kinder.

What ails you child? I never told her. Not
one word would cross my lips. Shadows I'd say. I don't like the shadows.
They're waiting to snatch me. There at the turn of the stairs.
On the landing. To the right of the wardrobe. In the fridge, white ghosts.
Black ghosts in the coal shed. In the bread bin, hungry ghosts.

Somewhere, elsewhere, my mother was sulking in the rain. I call up
her young face. Who did she think she was with her big words
and her belt and her beatings? Who do I think I am to write her?
She must have been sad. She must have been lonely.
Discipline. Chastisement. I stretch out my four year old hands.

MOTHER (from On Poetry in Dharmakaya)

mother you terrorist
muck mother mud mother
you chewed me up
you spat me out

mother you devourer
plucker of my soul bird
mammal self abuser
nightmatrix huntress

mother keeper
of calendar and keys
ticking off moon days
locking up the grain

mother house and tomb
your two breasts storing
strontium and lies
when you created time

mother you created plenty
you and your serpent consort
you and your nests
you and your alphabets

mother your pictographs
your mandalas your runes
your inches your seconds
your logic your grammar

mother wearing a necklace of skulls
who calls into being
by uttering the name
mater logos metric

mother your skirts
your skins your pelts
with your charms
old cow I'm your calf

mother fetishist
heart breaker
forsaker and fool
in the pouring rain

mother I stand
over your grave
and your granite headstone
and I weep

Swallows and Willows

When he caught me at the corner
with the curly headed green eyed boy
he brought me into detention.

'Write out, let me see,
a verse of a poem. Any
verse of your choice,

but longer than a quatrain,
five lines at least.
A hundred times.'

From The Jailer (underlined three times)
By Sylvia Plath

I imagine him
Impotent as distant thunder,
In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.
I wish him dead or away.
That, it seems, is the impossibility.

I was neat first, maybe
neat to the tenth time, then
a looping downward scrawl.

Out the window – swallows
and willows and sun on the river.
'I meant a verse from a *set* text.'

I sat at the edge of his class
right into summer exams
sulky, and lonely, and cruel.

Grandmother, Gesture

My grandmother's hands come back to soothe me.
They smell of rain. They smell of the city.

They untangle my hair and smooth
my brow. There's more truth

to those hands than all the poems
in the holy books. Her gesture is home.

The lines on her palms are maps:
She makes the whole world up-

She disappears it. It sings for her.
Its song is water, the sky is its colour.

She unpicks all riddles and solves
the small mysteries. She keeps the wolves

from the door. She opens wide the door.
Summer comes spilling in with a roar.

Train to Dublin

I lay my head in Akhmatova's lap,
 sob like a child, thumb in my mouth.
 She sings me lullabies, eases me into the dark.

Mother of my spirit, my guide,
 sweet lady smelling of mint and apple,
 I lay my head in Akhmatova's lap

and sleep. This night the train will reach
 the city. I'll find my healer.
 I lay my head in Akhmatova's lap.

At dawn the red fox passed my gate,
 the swallows came back to eslin,
 the willow sighed at my leaving.

I took my poems and passport;
 my sister's gold ring in my ear,
 waked into my fate in the clothes on my back.

I lay my head in Akhmatova's lap and
 sob myself to sleep. I'll
 wake to a song, a whorl

of light and your face
 coming towards me out of a dream.
 I lay my head in Akhmatova's lap.

Mayday

MYSTERIES OF THE HOME: INFLUENCE IN POETRY ON MOTHERHOOD AND THE DOMESTIC

“The influence of absences should not be underestimated. Isolation itself can have a powerful effect in the life of a young writer.” Eavan Boland, *Outside History*

The discussion of Paula Meehan’s mother and her relationships towards influence in her poetry is one that involves many facets of her writing, and both biographical and historical context. Meehan’s poetry dealing with these subjects reveals a vast complexity of feelings towards her mother and towards those who influenced her poetically. Though there are obviously many people and experiences that influenced her work in different ways, from American poet Gary Snyder to Irish poet W.B. Yeats to Eastern traditions, this segment will focus on the influence of her mother in her poetry. It is also important to see how the displacement of this influence was integral in allowing that space to be filled with the inspiration of her poetic precursors, especially Irish women like Eavan Boland. Though Boland and Meehan are certainly vastly different poets in many respects, a study of poetic influence using Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s theory of “Anxiety of Authorship” and Howard Bloom’s “Anxiety of Influence” cast intriguing notions of poetic relationship to predecessors, especially in the case of Paula Meehan. In this way, Meehan’s poems focusing on mother figures and influence offer insight to her progression as a poet.

I. MAKING ROOM FOR INFLUENCE

While usually the discussion of poetic influence in the traditional sense deals only with poetic precursors, or those who had written before the poet and thus influenced him or her, Paula Meehan’s poetry necessitates a discussion of her mother’s influence as well. In

a poignant interview with Irish poetry scholar Luz Mar Gonzalez Arias, Meehan confesses, “My own relationship with my mother was incredibly problematic.” True to this sentiment, in Meehan’s poetry, the speaker’s mother is often portrayed in scenes fraught with conflicting emotions such as nostalgia, contention, guilt, and anger. In the same interview Meehan readily admits that her relationship with her mother “underpins all of my work.” (Arias, 199) The mother is certainly a recurring figure as the subject of a substantial number of her poems, but her influence stretches much further than the lines of the poems written about her. The relationship between mother and daughter is undoubtedly a complicated one, but the fact that Meehan feels her own experiences with her mother “underpin” all of her work gives credence to the study of her mother as a large poetic influence.

Also, Meehan’s views of poetry are closely intertwined with the idea of motherhood, and her poems and interviews have often interweaved the idea of poetic and familial inheritance in a number of ways. As with the poem “Mother” it is almost impossible to determine whether the subject is poetic influence or an actual mother. Though it is titled “Mother”, the poem is contained within a set of three poems that bear the heading *On Poetry*. These poems all contain deep tones of motherhood in relation to poetry, and “Mother” is one of the best examples of how difficult it becomes to divorce the themes of motherhood and poetry in Meehan’s work. Because they are often inseparable, the interesting nature of influence in Paula Meehan’s poetry stretches beyond a discussion of purely poetic predecessors.

In *Outside History*, Eavan Boland claims, "The influence of absences should not be underestimated. Isolation itself can have a powerful effect in the life of a young writer." (Allen Randolph, *Sourcebook*, 72) In Paula Meehan's case, this absence of influences was a void created by the displacement of her mother's influence. Through the contention between Meehan and her mother in her childhood, and even in adulthood, an absence was formed, which then needed to be filled. Much of her poetry that portrays a mother figure and childhood reflections has a distinct theme of search for an influential figure other than her mother. These poems often set up a dichotomy between Meehan's mother and another figure, and her mother's life and a longing for escape from that life. Thus, in order to write poetry and escape from following in the footsteps of her mother, it became necessary for Meehan to displace her mother's influence to seek poetic influence. This is integral in a study of Meehan's progression as a poet.

Paula Meehan's statement that her relationship with her mother has been the influence for all of her work is a broad statement that begets many questions regarding the effects of influence. Her poems that feature a mother and other influences reveal an interesting process in Meehan's poetic development that, unlike many other theories suggest, did not involve a contention with poetic predecessors, but conflict with her original predecessor: her mother. Just as other theories of influence posit that the writer must overcome this conflict to become a unique poet, Meehan instead had to displace her mother's influence by asserting her individuality as a poet. Only then was she free to seek poetic inspiration in literary precursors that would, in a way, take the place of her mother influentially. This is also seen, to a different extent, in some details in Eavan Boland's prose. For poets who are a minority in a literary or poetic canon, in order to establish their

authority to write, there is a distinct need to overthrow or control the repressive influences (not always poetic) around them and find strength in new ones. Meehan's poetry on motherhood and the domestic shows a direct progression of the tension with and detachment from her mother's influence, the search for other poetic influences, and ultimately her need to find strong female poetic predecessors to embolden her poetic authority.

II. THE PATTERN OF RESISTANCE

Many of Meehan's poems that deal with the memories of childhood and mother figures express a strong desire to avoid the trap of domesticity, a contention with her mother and a resistance to following in her mother's footsteps. It could seem that while attempting to avoid the world in which her mother occupied, Meehan never escaped it, since much of her poetry fixates on that same world. Given her resistance to, yet fixation on the world of her mother, it could seem like a paradox or a failed attempt at detachment. Therefore, a suggestion that Meehan did not in fact escape the realm that she so desperately wanted to would not be an implausible one. One of her collections of poetry, in fact, is titled "Mysteries of the Home" which is tellingly dedicated to her mother. The fact that all of the poems previously listed in some way feature the domestic space or the mother suggests that Meehan may have been unable to completely separate from this same fate as her mother.

Many of her poems such as "Desire Path," "Stood Up," and "Pyrolatry" revolve around simple occurrences of suburban life, a realm which Eavan Boland before her also focused on. Since Boland famously featured domesticity in much of her poetry, it would be

tempting to group Meehan's scenes of domestic life with hers. However the similarities end with the theme itself. Boland wrote her poetry to form a new space where she could unite the one world of poetry and pubs, and her other, "almost invisible world that everyone knew of and no one referred to. Of suburbs and housing estates. Of children and women." (Allen Randolph, *Sourcebook*, 47) In Meehan's poetry, there are marked differences in this light. Though many of her poems focus on the same theme of domestic life, the two poets have entirely different reasons, methods and poems that do this. Where Boland specifically used her poetry to unite the two realms, literary and domestic, Meehan wrote poetry to resist the domestic. This is clear in "The Pattern," where she juxtaposes the speaker and her mother; her mother sat at home, cleaning and knitting, while she was outside, "sizing up the world beyond our flat patch by patch."

Though it is true that she often returns to the domestic space in many of her poems, such as "Take a Breath" and "Lullaby," it is often from the point of view of an outsider looking in. In "Take a breath" it is as a young runaway leaving her house, in "Lullaby" as a watchful narrator. Even when certain poems contain happy glimpses of her daily life, they still retain the undertones of some darkness or uncertainty. The glances the reader receives into the domestic life are ones that are narrated it seems by someone who is privy to this life, but not completely immersed in it. Further, many of the scenes involving the speaker's mother reflect uncertainties about her life. In "View From Under the Table" Meehan's speaker guesses that her mother "must have been sad. She must have been lonely." These are speculations only, though, offering theories rather than facts. This is shown again when Meehan asks, "Who am I to write her?" These lines reflect her hesitation to judge her given little information into her life, revealing once again the nature of a narrator who is

somehow outside of the narrative. Though she returns to these spaces often, the indication is that she is not a part of that world, nor was she ever entirely.

“The Pattern” is the most obvious demonstration of Meehan’s resistance to the domestic and most importantly to her mother’s influence. She presents a clear dichotomy between the speaker and her mother that runs through the entire poem. As Meehan’s narrator describes her mother buffing the floors until they shined, she asks, “Did her mirror tell her what mine tells me?” in a doubtful tone. Though it seems to be a question Meehan is unable to answer it is clear that she is unsure, possibly afraid of her reply, as she has “her shrug and go on, knowing history has brought her to her knees.” This image is not a positive one, leading the reader to believe that Meehan does not want her own mirror to reflect her mother’s image. Saying, “She favored sensible shades: /Moss Green, Mustard, Beige./I dreamt a robe of a color /so pure it became a word,” Meehan again contrasts herself and her mother with vivid images of dullness and brightness.

While this suggests obvious tension and opposition between her and her mother, “The Pattern” also provides insight into the influence Meehan felt her mother had on her. The reader sees this in the very first line, where the speaker claims “Little has come down to me of hers.” And, as she lists her inheritance, “a clutch of photos, the sting of her hand/ across my face in one of our wars,” it becomes clear that the mother’s influence was not an entirely positive one. It is in the final stanzas that Meehan expresses her feelings about the effect of the mother’s influence:

If I swam like a kite too high
amongst the shadows on the ceiling

or flew like a fish in the pools
of pulsing light, she'd reel me firmly
home, she'd land me at her knees.

She then describes her mother in the final tercet with "Tongues of flame in her dark eyes, she'd say, 'One of these days I must teach you to follow a pattern,'" reflecting the mother's limitations that she imposed on her child.

"Mother" is a strong poem that portrays the mother much in the same limiting, constricting way as in "The Pattern". This poem again reinforces the desire and necessity for Meehan to detach from the restrictive influence of her mother as a part of the process of gaining poetic authority. As I will detail further in the next section, Meehan often uses motherhood as a metaphor for the creation of poetry. The poem "Mother" is included under the heading "On Poetry" in Meehan's books. This alone shows two important aspects of her poetry on her mother, that she associates creation of poetry with being a mother and that for her the creation of poetry is closely linked with the ability to separate herself from her mother's influence. Though this poem could be read in number of ways, it is decidedly a negative view of the mother, as it starts with "mother you terrorist." The first parallel the reader gets to her mother is the description of the mother as a "devourer/ plucker of my soul bird." Much in the style of "The Pattern," Meehan describes both negative influences of her mother with a sense of guilt or regret. She again, like in "The Pattern," shows her mother's influence as strict and limiting, with her "pictographs," "inches," and "grammar." She goes on to end with extremely conflicting emotions:

mother fetishist
 heart breaker
 forsaker and fool
 in the pouring rain

mother I stand
 over your grave
 and your granite headstone
 and I weep

Though it is not entirely clear that this poem is referring literally to her own mother, it is worth noting that a poem with this magnitude of negativity towards a “Mother” is included in a section on poetry. If viewed in the light of the other poems in this section, this could be seen as Meehan’s statement of her struggle to confront these feelings about her mother in the act of writing poetry. This would again lend credence to the displacement of her mother’s influence and its importance in her creative and influential process. As she was quoted in an interview, Meehan maintained, “My abiding fear is that I will become my mother.” (Arias, 1999) This fear is seen in much of her poetry on mother figures and the domestic space.

Fraught with tension, discontent and restriction, these scenes reflect a need for the detachment from her mother in order to flourish poetically. In these poems it is clear she rejected the influence of her mother as a young girl. This is also seen within a biographical context, as Meehan left home at age 17 to travel abroad and complete her education in America. As Mary O’Malley states, “Meehan appears in her own early poems like some gypsy wanderer, with a gold ring, a sheaf of poems and the world her rightful oyster.” (Allen Randolph, *Text and Context*, 5) However, it is true also that despite this expressed desire to escape the environment in which she grew up, she returned to Dublin

and to the home, both literally and poetically. Her certainty in “The Pattern,” that a ship would carry her “to Zanzibar, Bombay, the Land of the Ethiops”, then, would seem to be nothing more than the exotic fancies of a young girl. In an interview about her return Meehan said, “I felt that the poems I had to write I would only get in Dublin.” (Allen Randolph, *The Body Politic*, 240) This return was then the inspiration for the title of her first book of collected poems, “Return and No Blame.” A large number of her poems feature the Dublin cityscape such as “Home,” “Night Walk,” “Window on the City” and others. It is questionable whether she was able to avoid the influence of her mother in the ways that she expressed in these poems, since she has lived and written in and about Dublin since 1990.

It becomes clear in “The Exact Moment I Became a Poet” that escape from her mother’s influence was not necessarily leaving Dublin or the home itself. Meehan claims that the exact moment she became a poet was as she listened to her teacher say,

*‘Attend to your books, girls,
or mark my words, you’ll end up
in the sewing factory.’*

She goes on to say that neighbors, friends’ mothers, even her aunt, worked in the sewing factory, and though she seemed to respect it, attend to her books is what she did. Meehan escaped this world of domesticity, of her mother by writing poetry. It is in this way that she is different from her mother, not necessarily in her travels or experiences abroad. Leaving home at 17 to travel abroad in Europe and America was not, then, the ultimate rejection, however, so returning to Dublin was not acquiescence to that influence as an adult. In an

interview she mirrors this sentiment, saying she “began to realize how powerfully healing the making path could be, you could actually transform what was oppressive into something very powerful.” (Allen Randolph, Interview, 242) She ultimately did create space for poetic influence by displacing her mother’s through writing, through transforming the oppressive into “something very powerful”: an absence of influence.

III. THE INFLUENCE OF ABSENCES

Meehan’s poetry shows that at a very young age, Meehan sought to free herself of the “pattern” that her mother wanted her to follow. This tension between her dreams and her mother’s limitations created a void that became influential to her creative process. The “influence of absences” that Eavan Boland described in *Object Lessons* is the void created by a lack of relatable poetic influences. This influence alters the poet’s poetic authority, search for and interaction with poetic predecessors. The influence of poetic precursors is an undeniable and necessary one in poetry. However, the search and interaction with these poetic influences was complicated, in Meehan’s case, by the same absence of influences that Boland experienced.

At the time that Meehan began writing, travelling, and learning, Eavan Boland had yet to break through the barrier of the critical acclaim that would create a ray of poetic authority for women in Ireland. As a result, she could find a conspicuous lack of authoritative female figures in the Irish poetic canon. This again caused an isolation that was critical in the formation of Paula Meehan as a poet. There are many different theories on the extent of poetic influence, and I don’t intend to engage in, in Harold Bloom’s terms, “the wearisome industry of source-hunting, of allusion-counting.” I only intend to show,

referencing Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theory of anxiety of authorship, that Meehan's rejection of her mother as a strong poetic authority urged her to seek the authority elsewhere, and that this journey was made difficult by the lack of relatable poetic influences in the Irish canon. This search is reflected in her poetry and is an integral element to the discussion of poetic influence.

Harold Bloom introduced his theory in the controversial 1973 book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. What made Bloom's book so provocative in the world of poetry and literary criticism was his theory that influence created an anxiety in the poet, essentially being a negative influence. This "anxiety of influence," or fear that a poet cannot say anything new, must be overcome in order for the later poet to gain standing in the canon. According to Bloom, poetic creation "--when it involves two strong, authentic poets--always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation." (Bloom, 30) This misreading, then, allows the poet to challenge the "anxiety of influence" by way of writing poetry. Bloom is clear in saying that any poet that is unable to do this cannot be considered in the same league as the predecessor and be included in the canon. He uses as an example "Oscar Wilde, who knew he had failed as a poet because he lacked the strength to overcome his anxiety of influence."

Bloom argues that the entirety of the western canon is built on this anxiety of influence and that "The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main traditions of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist." He goes on to trace the progression of the poets that he sees as

“great” and how they were begotten of one another. As he follows the line of great poets, however, it becomes clear that he has only mentioned few women poets, Dickinson and Rossetti, and in passing. He also, in tracing the birth of the “great” poets, differentiates between them and “weaker” poets. He stated that his theory was applicable to “the main traditions of poetry since the Renaissance,” which implied that if excluded from the canon, the poet must automatically be considered lesser than those who were. This becomes problematic in the case of traditions past and present that exclude poets based on gender, race, ethnicity or factors other than the merit of their poetry. (Bloom, 30)

In 1979 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which they contend that Bloom’s theory cannot apply to female poets due to this very fact. They elucidate how the idea of poetic influence for women is inherently different because “she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her.” (48) And, while the Bloom theory of influence states that the male writer suffers from a fear that they cannot create anything new and be considered in league with their precursor, the female poet has the “radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her”. In effect, the problem for the female poet becomes “anxiety of authorship” or being the “daughter of too few mothers”. Gilbert and Gubar claim that this lack of foremothers causes Bloom’s violent Oedipal writing process to become null and void in the case of women poets. The anxiety of authorship causes the female poet’s relationship with her predecessors to be a beneficial one rather than an anxious one. It is “only by seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal authority is possible” (49). For Gilbert

and Gubar, the female predecessor is necessary to show the poet that others have gone before him, thus contesting Bloom's argument that "where generosity is involved, the poets influenced are minor or weaker." (Bloom, 30)

An application of the theory of Anxiety of Authorship discussed in *The Madwoman in the Attic* is especially relevant in the case of Paula Meehan and Irish poets. Historically, the Irish canon has had long standing exclusionary standards when it comes to gender, whether intentionally or unintentionally. What does it mean to write in an Irish culture that is only now beginning to include women in the canon? "What does it mean," Gilbert and Gubar ask, "to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are, as we have seen, both overtly and covertly patriarchal?" (45)

IV. THE SEARCH FOR INFLUENCE

Though both theories deal with the poetic influence, not necessarily the biographical influences, a theory may be put forth that there is an intersection between Bloom's anxiety of influence and Gilbert and Gubar's anxiety of authorship in the displacement of her mother's influence in Paula Meehan's poetry. The anxiety of authorship is relevant in many ways in the poetry of Paula Meehan, and indeed the work of many female Irish poets writing in the past 30 years. In examining *The Madwoman in the Attic*, it also becomes clear that Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence is irrelevant in the female Irish poet's relationship to her predecessors since it cannot be applied to groups of poets that have been historically excluded from a canon based on factors other than poetic merit. We cannot disregard Bloom's theory, though, in regards to a more Freudian or

familial reading, because Meehan's displacement of her mother's influence was crucial to her development as a poet.

The poems that deal with mother figures, while showing a struggle to avoid the influence of her mother, also contain insight into her search for new influences as a poet. This search is something that Eavan Boland also discusses in *Object Lessons*. In an unpublished manuscript, she thinks back to the times she would listen to her "clever and willful father" recite history, names of battles, leaders, and famous orations. All the while she looked for "one inch where I could breathe or live." She reflects that for many women "there must be one place where the dream of becoming a poet died." While her poetic dreams did not die there, Boland claims that if they had she "would have thought back to that place" where she listened to her father. (Allen Randolph, *Sourcebook*, 55) In this way, the reader gains insight into the influence that Boland, like Meehan, had to overcome in order to progress as a poet: her father's. In this way both female Irish poets, facing oppression on multiple fronts reflect a certain need to overthrow a limiting influence in a way that can be seen as an anxiety of influence. However, just as Gilbert and Gubar state, Bloom's theory is inapplicable to women poets, especially ones writing in a predominately male field. While it may be unsuitable in the case of poetic precursors, the need to overcome an anxiety of influence is clear in both Boland and Meehan. The anxiety of influence does not apply to their female poetic precursors, but to other influences in their lives.

After overcoming their individual anxiety of influence, they must then embark on a search for poetic precursors and influences due to the anxiety of authorship. Unlike

Bloom's theory, Gilbert and Gubar's anxiety of authorship applies perfectly to Meehan's situation. According to them, she can overcome this anxiety "only by seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed", (49) is instead an influence that strengthens her voice. Discussing this displacement and subsequent replacement of influence, Meehan says "I was very lucky that it wasn't just myself and my mother, in which case I don't think I would have survived it. I had other resources, other women around me" (Arias 199-200) Revealing much of the same speculation as Boland, Meehan shows again that the detachment from her mother was necessary, as was the search for "other resources".

Meehan's poetry traces some parts of this search, which started at a very young age. "The View from under the Table" is the first poem to show a direct correlation between the displacement of her mother's influence and the substitution of another's: her paternal grandmother's. In this poem Meehan creates a clear distinction of opposites between her mother and grandmother. She writes how her grandmother would "rock me. She'd lull me. No one was kinder." While Meehan sits on her grandmother's lap, her mother is then brought into the poem with the words "elsewhere, my mother was sulking in the rain." She asks of her mother, "Who did she think she was with her big words/ and her belt and her beatings?" creating a strong opposition between the rocking and lulling of her grandmother and the belt and beatings of her mother. The last line cements this juxtaposition of her mother and grandmother saying, "Discipline. Chastisement. I stretch out my four year old hands." The reader is left with the implication that her "four year old hands" were not outstretched for her mother. In this poem we see that even as a four-year-old child Meehan was already displacing her mother's influence for her grandmother's.

In multiple interviews, Meehan discusses her grandmother as one of the people who introduced her to the oral tradition, a tradition which has continued to influence and seep through much of Meehan's poetry. She was "a child of an inner-city working-class culture steeped in a rich oral tradition," (Allen Randolph, *Text and Context*, 5) a childhood which Meehan described as "a fantastically rich childhood in sonic terms." (Allen Randolph, *The Body Politic*, 240) Again referencing the same spot in her grandmother's house, she says "Some of the best things I ever heard were from under the table on the edge of the adult world." She credits her grandmother for much of this exposure, as she "would go for hours, sifting through story and lineage." (241) Comparing her grandmother to her mother, Meehan concedes, "I had a much easier, much more positive and much more comforting relationship with my grandmother." (Arias, 200) In her poem, "Grandmother, gesture" she again describes the positive influence of her grandmother and her ability to introduce Meehan to the world of poetry through oral tradition. Meehan writes, "The lines on her palms are maps:/ She makes the whole world up" which indicates her creativity rather than limitation that affected her. The world, she says, "sings for her" and though it is not written poetry or song, "Its song is water, the sky is its colour." These influences are visible in many of her individual poems, as well as in the titles of collections "Painting rain" or "Reading the Sky." Her grandmother and the oral history were then her first poetic influences as a result of the displacement of her mother's, thus allowing her to flourish as a writer.

In "Swallows and Willows" it is evident that she had begun searching for other influences beyond her grandmother and oral tradition. In it Meehan describes a memory of detention when her teacher made her write a verse of a poem "at least a hundred times" as

punishment. Meehan scrawls a 5-line verse from “The Jailer” (underlined three times for her teacher’s benefit) by Sylvia Plath. In this poem she finds solace, and possibly irony, in Plath’s words, to the point that she knew the words by heart. She also remembered the teacher remarking, “I meant a verse from a *set* text.” This is reflective of her finding a kindred spirit, a female literary figure to look up to in her work and in life. Plath is certainly not the only influence Meehan found, but as a strong female figure, Meehan’s remembrance of the use of the words of this particular poet is especially important to her development of poetic authority.

Following her journey, she left home to study at Trinity and travel abroad. However, when she returned to Dublin “it seemed really hostile. There weren’t the outlets. So I just got on with it in my way. The opportunity came up to go and study in the States for two years.” (Arias, 190) This again reflects her movement abroad as a search for kindred poetic influences, after she “looked at all the little [Irish] magazines and I didn’t see any women’s names.” In America she found the communal Native American poetry of Gary Snyder, which resonated with her own background in oral tradition. As she said, “Snyder was showing me in his work Native American traditions that were still within living memory.” For her, he “reinforced the idea of a path that was poetry, that could use the spiritual traditions, the Native American traditions” and thus her own Irish oral traditions and myths. Just as she believed “Snyder was radical to use different strands, to use history, myth, poetry, archeology, linguistics” in his poetry, she received encouragement that she could use the same experiences that she had as a child in Dublin, that were “still in living memory.” (Allen Randolph, Interview, 248-9)

However, some of the most important influences came upon her final return to Ireland, where she discovered the Irish women finally beginning to break through the invisible wall that had previously kept them from the Irish canon. She describes reading Eavan Boland and Gaelic poet Nuala ni Dhomhnaill for the first time and “feeling ‘Oh God, it’s great, I am not on my own.’” This sentiment mirrors Gilbert and Gubar’s feelings about the female relationship to the precursor. These women proved to be the “female precursor who...proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal authority is possible” (49) that was necessary to offer encouragement of authority. While reading, Meehan said “It was like a revelation, manna from heaven. I can remember the experience of opening Eavan Boland’s books and reading this poetry that spoke directly, so immediately and so powerfully to me.” (Arias, 198) As an Irish woman poet making a space for herself and others, Meehan says Boland “outlined pitfalls I was able to avoid.” This is a very different relationship to the predecessor than the one that Bloom describes. (Allen Randolph, *The Body Politic*, 247)

Another clear example of this search for influences is reflected in “Train to Dublin”. In it Meehan writes of finding strength in Russian poet Anna Akmatova, repeating, “I lay my head in Akmatova’s lap”. Akmatova would have been an important figure for Meehan to discover, as she encountered many of the challenges faced by a female writer in a patriarchal society. One of the first female Russian poets to gain immense fame, Akmatova wrote during the Stalin regime. During the persecution of many literary figures, philosophers and artists, she witnessed the ban of her poetry and the execution of many of her friends and family members. Despite this, she stayed in Russia and continued to write under extreme duress and repression. Much like Meehan, she also experienced opposition

when attempting to write and publish as a young poet. Her father refused to have his last name on anything she would write, forcing her to adopt the surname of her Grandmother as a pen name. In her poem, Meehan importantly imagines Ahkmatova as a mother figure. As she describes laying her head in her lap, Meehan says she “sob(s) like a child, thumb in my mouth.” Akmatova is said then to comfort Meehan: “She sings me lullabies, eases me into the dark.” Meehan then calls her “Mother of my spirit, my guide,” giving the reader definitive images of a mother coddling a child. This poem is one of the most concrete examples of Meehan’s search for influence. She not only reveals her finding poetic inspiration in Ahkmatova, but also compares her to her mother, essentially taking her place. As she did with Sylvia Plath and Eavan Boland, Meehan discovers a relatable influence to be her “guide” to inspire her and influence her in the place of her mother.

This search for the poetic influence is not one that ends when a poet such as Meehan establishes her voice authoritatively, as she has in the Irish canon. She wrote of her latest collection, “Toward the end of *Painting Rain*, I grew very interested in re-examining the whole area of confessional poetry. I started to read again poets who were labeled confessional, some of the American poets—Sexton, Lowell.” This collection was published as recently as 2009, so it is clear that Meehan continues to search for that “feeling of excitement and identification” in her female precursors, rather than having to overcome anxiety from their influence. (Arias, 198)

Though the influence of these poets, and countless others, is clear in Meehan’s poetry, she also has a much different poetic style from Boland or Snyder. In the act of reading Yeats, Milton, Shakespeare, as aspiring poets undoubtedly do, they find comfort,

inspiration, but also a yearning for individuality. These influences are necessary, as both Bloom and Gilbert and Gubar agree, in the formation of a great poet because they lead to the new poet's individual style. This style, developed through the culmination of years of experience and influences, is unique, but can't help but reflect the effect of these influences. Though Meehan agrees that Boland illuminated certain challenges that she should avoid, she says "no doubt there were others I stumbled into in the dark, so to speak, or that were of my own making." (Allen Randolph, *The Body Politic*, 247) In this way, she developed her own individual style out of the influence of her predecessors.

Paula Meehan's poetry that features her mother, her grandmother, and her other poetic influences reveals a difference in the poetic development than either of the books *Anxiety of Influence* and *The Madwoman in the Attic* posit. In Meehan's case, she needed to displace the control of her mother's repressive influence to clear space for the possibility of other, more positive influences. Similarly this trend can be seen in Boland's work as well. This need, first for detachment from constraint, may be something that is inherent in the growth of poets that are excluded or the minority in any canon. Because of their extreme under representation in their own canon, both Meehan and Boland experienced the influence of absences and struggled to find relatable influences in their lives and authoritative poetic ones in their writing. Thus, this influence of absences, the space in between, the intersection between the anxiety of influence and the anxiety of authorship, may be the driving force for excluded or repressed poet, certainly in the Irish canon, but also in any canon.

While the poetry that features her mother is instrumental in revealing the process of gaining poetic authority for Meehan, her poems on poetry and creation also give further insight into this need to subvert repressive influences. Just as her poetry on her mother is inextricably linked to the creative process, the meshing of these two experiences continues throughout all of her poetry, eventually forming an inseparability of the two.

THEME 2: ON POETRY AND CREATION

It Is All I Ever Wanted
for Eavan Boland

to sit by this window
 the long stretched light of april falling
 on my desk, to allow

the peace of this empty page
 and nearing
 forty years of age

to hold in these hands
 that have learnt to be soothing
 my native city, its hinterland

and backstreets and river scored
 memory of spring
 blossom and birds –

my girl-poems
 fountaining
 over grief and the want of someplace to call home.

Last week I took as metaphor, or at least as sign,
 a strange meeting:
 a young fox walking the centre line

down the south side of the Square
 at three in the morning.
 She looked me clear

In the eyes, both of us curious
 and unafraid. She was saying –
 or I needed her to say – *out of the spurious*

*the real, be sure
 to know the value of the song
 as well as the song's true nature.*

Be sure, my granny used to say,
 of what you're wanting,
 for fear you'd get it entirely.

Be sure, I tell myself,
 you are suffering

animal like the fox, not nymph

nor sylph, nor figment,
but human heart breaking
in the silence of the street.

Familiar who grants me the freedom of the city,
my own hands spanning
the limits of pity.

A Woman's Right to Silence

When the silence of the grave
steals over me as it does
like a mantle that comforts each day

I fancy it could save
me, the way the fuzz
on a sweet peach, say

the one you gave
me in bed not an hour ago nuzz-
ling up and making even the grey

of this spring morning easier to bear
can save me; or those first
ash leaves that as I decide

which skirt to wear
start their slow deliberate burst-
ing from the bonny black bead,

allow me claim silence as a rare
and fine sister, not in the least a curst
state, but ecstatic, free, untried.

On Poetry
for Niamh Morris

Virgin

To look back then:
one particular moon snared in the willows
and there I am sleeping in my body,
a notebook beside me with girl poems in it
and many blank pages to fill
and let there be a rose and the memory of its thorn
and a scar on my thigh where the thorn had ripped

earlier that day in the abandoned garden
where he came first to me
and lifted my skirt
and we sank to the ground.

And let me be peaceful
for I wasn't.
Not then, nor for many moons after.

Whore

I learnt it well. I learnt it early on:
that nothing's free, that everything is priced
and easier to do the business, be cute, be wized
up and sussed, commodify the fun

then barter flesh in incremental spite
the way the goodwives/girlfriends did
pretending to be meek and do as bid
while close-managing their menfolk. I wasn't right.

I believed it wasn't right. See me now –
I'm old and blind and past my sexual prime
and it's been such a long and lonely time
since I felt fire in my belly. I must allow

there'll be no chance of kindling from my trance
the spark that wakes the body into dance;
yet still comes unbidden like god's gift: an image –
a boy turns beneath me, consolatory and strange.

Well

I know this path by magic not by sight.
Behind me on the hillside the cottage light
is like a star that's gone astray. The moon
is waning fast, each blade of grass a rune
inscribed by hoarfrost. This path's well worn.
I lug a bucket by bramble and blossoming blackthorn.
I know this path by magic not by sight.
Next morning when I come home quite unkempt
I cannot tell what happened at the well.
You spurn my explanation of a sex spell
cast by the spirit that guards the source
that boils deep in the belly of the earth,
even when I show you what lies strewn
in my bucket – a golden waning moon,
seven silver stars, our own porch light,
your face at the window staring into the dark.

ON POETRY AND CREATION: THE CONCEPTION OF POETRY AND POETRY AS CONCEPTION

It is not at all difficult to discern an obvious similarity between Paula Meehan's poems that discuss motherhood and those that center on the topic of the creation of poetry. In the above poetry, Meehan develops an overarching metaphor that seemingly connects these poems to each other and to the ones in the previous section. Throughout her work on poetry, she relates her creative process to the process of conception or procreation. This metaphor is present in all of the above poems in various forms, presenting different stages of the writing process as stages in the cycle of conception. This metaphor is important for understanding her views on poetry and creation because it establishes a connection between sexuality and poetry, between motherhood and the poem, and between physicality and writing. In creating these images in the mind of the reader, Meehan also places the poet in the revered position of the mother and the poem in the cherished role of the child. From the phase of inspiration as sexual intercourse to the final product of a poem as a child, this metaphor further complicates the traditional idea of motherhood that Meehan challenges and questions in her maternally centered poetry. Her subversion of this domestic and catholic ideal also reveals her ability to create an artistic resistance against the sources of oppression and boundary in her life.

I. THE POWER OF PROCREATION

Immediately discernible in Meehan's metaphoric connection of conception to creation is the placement of the poet in the role of mother and the poem in the position of child. The reader draws the conclusion from the first poem in the series "On Poetry", "Virgin", during which Meehan is first visited by the male poetry, comparing it to a sexual

encounter, to the title of the second poem, "Mother", and through the final line of "Whore" when she refers to a baby that turns beneath her, "consolatory and strange." While certainly this implies that Meehan sees the poem as something as precious and alive as a child, it also has important consequences in the role of the poet as the mother. Just as creating poetry involving motherhood and the domestic allowed Meehan to control those topics that she felt as oppressive, writing the poet as the mother is another way in which she takes control of the role. Seen as repressive from her own experience as a daughter, the view of herself as a mother transfers her own repression or subordination into the position of power. Again, Meehan's ability to subvert an oppressive situation becomes clear.

This also plays an important role in the development of poetic authority, and the reversal of the roles of women in society and poetry. The patriarchy in Irish poetry is again contested with this metaphor of motherhood. Gilbert and Gubar state that one of the obstacles women writers face in gaining poetic authority is the image of the male writer as the father of the poem. "In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power." (6) Male writers have used this image to describe their own relationship to their poetry, as well as male literary theorists, such as Harold Bloom. Bloom, describing the history of poetic influence, describes it as a "filial relationship" or "a battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites." Furthering the analogy, the poet is also often compared to the "ultimate" creator, God the Father. This then creates a structure that is ultimately governed by the male creator, as "In all these aesthetics the poet, like God the Father, is a paternalistic ruler of the fictive world he has created." (5) The

male poet is then ascribed the omnipotent power, begging the question, “Where does such an implicitly or explicitly patriarchal theory of literature leave literary women?” (7)

Meehan’s metaphor of the poet as the woman creator, or mother, reverses this role, placing the female in the position of creator. By, intentionally or otherwise, comparing the female poet to the mother, Meehan does exactly what the male poets and theorists have done, reclaiming the power of the poet for the female writer instead of maintaining the paternal hierarchy. In her poems, she retains the creative authority and the ability to write the poem, as the mother. Just as the mother is ostentatiously absent from the paternal model, in “Whore” the father is a non-entity, “a spark”. In the metaphor of paternity, the woman does not have generative power. However, in Meehan’s maternal metaphor, the mother gains the ability to write poetry. Gilbert and Gubar observe that the male poets and theorists who have perpetuated this paternal model “all seem overwhelmingly to agree that a literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, made flesh.”(6) Though this power in many cases is not afforded to women, Meehan’s metaphor of the creative process as the cycle of conception subverts the male patriarchy and gives poetic authority to the female.

II. THE PHYSICALITY OF POETRY

This interweaving of the physical acts of creation, sex, and conception to writing in her work is also another way to represent Meehan’s view that poetry is a primarily physical activity, more so than an intellectual one. Just as sex and sexuality certainly have elements of emotional, spiritual and mental aspects, but are considered primarily in the physical realm, Paula Meehan thinks of poetry as a fundamentally physical art. As she states in an

interview, “I think poetry is physical. Completely.” In fact, she claims that, to her “it’s more physical than intellectual. I feel it first as something physical.” (Arias, 195) It is not exactly surprising, remembering her roots in the Irish oral tradition have heavily influenced her lyric style. Meehan “grew up in an oral tradition: the stories, the singers, the old people...the sometimes very empowering lore.” She says during this time she “developed...a hunger for ritualized sound, in and of itself.” (Allen Randolph, *The Body Politic*, 239) This ritualized sound is present in her lyric, rhythmic technique, as well as her poetry readings themselves. While attending a reading, I was immediately struck by her movements, often swaying back and forth and tapping her foot in time with the rhythm. Meehan’s view that “All the elements of poetry are rooted in physical experience, like the rhythm of a poem, its music, it is indeed a physical experience” shines through in her movements and the comparison of poetry to the physical act of conception. In this way it reflects the priority of the physical over the intellectual, as she maintains that “you can bypass the mind and the ego with a poem in a way that is difficult to do with any other kind of expression.” (Arias, 195)

The physicality, rather than intellectuality of poetry also reflects Meehan’s view of poetry as something that is intrinsically unexplainable. She qualifies her claim that poetry is more physical than mental by saying, “Although I am wary of those statements that it [poetry] is anything.” (Arias, 195) This sentiment is again mirrored in the text on poetry, where she often infuses her poems with images of magic and spells. In “Well,” describing her creative process, Meehan repeats “I know this path by magic not by sight.” Similar to her priority for the physical over the mental in poetry, she places “magic” in the primary position over sight, the more logical of the two. In the same poem, she describes her

experience as a “sex spell” and saying she “cannot tell what happened at the well.” Her references to spirituality and allusions to religion further reinforce this. In “Whore” she likens inspiration to “god’s gift” that “comes unbidden.”

Her poetry that addresses the creative process certainly contains details of the supernatural, reflecting her view that poetry is something indefinite, containing elements of some quality that defies the intellectual capacity to define. Despite her assertions that poetry is indefinable, there is a distinct metaphor that pervades much of this poetry, likening it to the act and cycle of conception. The analogy between the conception of a child and the creation of a poem reflects the mystery of inspiration, the relationship of Meehan to her poetry, and her subversion of the traditional ideals that had been excluding women poets from the Irish canon. This overarching metaphor can be seen to mirror the various stages of the cycle of conception, development and birth.

III. “THE PEACE OF THIS EMPTY PAGE”: THE IMAGE OF CONTENTMENT IN PRE-WRITING

A detail that pervades many of her poems depicting the subject of poetry and creation is the feeling of the peace that precedes the writing process, and the following tumult of the creation of a poem. Peace is seen as a prelude to the creative process, a peace which also precedes the conception cycle. In the same way that a mother, in hindsight, views the time before a child as relatively peaceful, Meehan juxtaposes the image of unease of creation to the relative calm before it.

In “It’s All I Ever Wanted” Meehan describes “the peace of this empty page” that exists before she begins to write. Though she claims that to write poetry is all she ever wanted, rather than a feeling of contentment in the finished product, there is a tone of calm

before the storm in the time before writing. This is again seen in “A Woman’s Right to Silence,” which indicates her feeling by its ironic title. In it, Meehan describes “silence as a rare/ and fine sister, not in the least a curst/state, but ecstatic, free, untried.” Where silence is usually associated with repression, Meehan transmutes it into a positive space, reclaiming it from the oppressive. This again shows her perception of the time before writing as a peaceful space in the mind. In “Virgin,” Meehan clearly delineates the difference between the inner conflict of writing and the ease of the blank page. She writes of how she first started writing poetry, describing first “a notebook...and many blank pages to fill.” With the coming of poetry, there is “a rose and the memory of its thorn” and scar from “where the thorn had ripped.” Even the positive image of the rose, the illusion of something beautiful, is paired with not only the imagery of the thorn, but of the pain of it ripping through skin and leaving a scar. The implication is one of pain and permanence. In the final stanza, Meehan again writes of her discontent, saying poetry would not allow her to be peaceful, “Not then, nor for many moons after.” The indication in “Virgin” from the image of both the scar and her description of restlessness is that poetry is a power that she cannot ignore, though it may cause her distress. This stark contrast between the peace of the empty page and the whirlwind of emotions during the writing process reveals Meehan’s complexity of thought, emotion and perception on the creation of poetry. The peace of the empty page then reflects her idea that, just as motherhood brings with it new challenges and frustrations, writing poetry comes with emotional tumult.

IV. “A SEX SPELL”: INSPIRATION AS A SEXUAL ENCOUNTER

A striking detail pervasive in much of Meehan’s poetry is its overt sexuality. This sexuality is especially present in her poems that discuss the creative process. Just as the

first stage of conception is sexual intercourse, writing poetry first requires inspiration. Meehan makes this analogy quite clear in many places throughout these poems, reinforcing the metaphor of creation of poetry to conception of a child, and inspiration to a sexual encounter.

There are three poems that Meehan includes under the title “On Poetry”: “Virgin,” “Mother,” and “Whore.” On the outset, the titles themselves reveal Meehan’s perception of writing poetry as the act of conception. As expected, “Virgin” is a metaphoric retelling of the first time “poetry” comes to Paula Meehan, using the loss of her virginity as an analogy. In it, she personifies poetry as a man and couples this with strong sexual undertones, saying:

“where he came first to me
and lifted my skirt
and we sank to the ground.”

This overtly sexual poem clearly reflects Meehan’s comparison of the writing process to a sexual encounter. In her poem “Whore” she also reflects the same sentiment, but at a different phase of life and poetry writing. This poem also builds on the conflicting tone that has been present in the previous poems. She says that she has learned “that nothing’s free, that everything is priced.” This mirrors the contrasting images of the rose with the thorn in “Virgin,” implying that with the beauty of creativity and the finished poem, comes inner discontent and tumult. She also describes being “old and blind and past my sexual prime” and it having been “such a long and lonely time/ since I felt a fire in my belly.” While this could be read literally (as a reference to sex drive only), it is included under her title of “On Poetry.” Keeping this in mind, it is again reflective of the sexual relationship between poetry and the creator. Whereas in “Virgin” Meehan describes the first time poetry comes to her, here she is comparing the loss of sex drive to what can only

be seen as writer's block. However, eventually she experiences inspiration, or "the spark that wakes the body into dance" which "yet still comes unbidden like god's gift." And yet again, in the poem "Well", she compares the inspiration and writing poetry to a "sex spell."

This analogy of sex and poetry reflects her expansion of the boundaries of what is considered Irish poetry and a rebellion against the constraints placed upon the genre and her gender. Her portrayal of sexuality is central to understanding Meehan's views toward poetry and creation, however it is not restricted to this context. Many of her other poems; such as "Tantric Master," are explicitly sexual and detailed poems. This is yet another way in which Meehan is able to subvert male poetic authority and transfer it to the female voice. By giving sexual tones and subjects to her poems, she transforms something that has traditionally only been expressed in male terms, sexual energy, and portrays it as female. As Gilbert and Gubar state, sexuality is more than just the subject of the poem in male written literature. "Male sexuality, in other words, is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power." (4) Since the sexuality is then male, and the "poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis," the woman is not seen as having the ability to create poetry. By expressing her sexuality, especially in the poems pertaining to the creation of poetry, Meehan attributes sexuality to the female poet, thus giving her sexual and "literary power."

V. "A BOY TURNS": PREGNANCY AND THE CONCEPTION OF THE POEM

As inspiration is described as the first part of conception, or sexual intercourse, the formation of the poem itself is then likened to pregnancy and birth, and the poem to a child. In "Whore," after Meehan experiences "the spark that wakes the body into dance" or the "fire in [her] belly," she then describes a metaphoric pregnancy. In the last line Meehan

compares the poem to a child, completing the metaphor of conception to poetry, saying, “a boy turns beneath me, consolatory and strange.” It is important to note that this comes in the last line of the poem, and that “Whore” is the last poem in the series “On Poetry”. The pregnancy and existence of the “child” is the ultimate stage in conception and thus the conception of the poem.

This image of the infant also presents an interesting parallel that becomes exceedingly relevant to the act of resistance against outside repressive forces. The baby Meehan describes in “Whore” is not just any child; it is specifically a baby boy. Meehan also mentions that this baby and the image before it come “unbidden like god’s gift”. This immediately alludes to the catholic myth of the Annunciation. During this event, the Bible states that the angel Gabriel appears as a vision to the Virgin Mary and tells her, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee” and foretells her conception of the “Son of God” or Jesus. (Luke 1:36) Thus when Meehan beholds “an image” that inspires her and thus metaphorically impregnates her, it is a direct reference to the Annunciation of Mary. She then strengthens this analogy by comparing herself to the mother Mary and her poem to the baby Jesus, and her creative process to the Annunciation which is a story that most people in western traditions have an amount of familiarity with. By alluding to one of the Christianity’s most mysterious doctrines, Meehan again reaffirms the inherent spiritual and enigmatic aspect of poetry. The magic of the “sex spell” and creativity as something that cannot be fully explained is further reinforced in Meehan’s reference to religion. This allusion cements her metaphor of the cycle of conception as the conception of a poem and brings attention to another important aspect of her use of that metaphor: the subversion of one of the most strictly held views of Christianity.

VI. PROCREATION AS CREATION: THE SUBVERSION OF CATHOLICISM

This overarching metaphor, comparing the creation of poetry to procreation in the familial sense, is important not only in the analysis of Meehan's views on poetry but also in its obvious reversal of the Catholic and traditional roles of women and mothers in Irish society. While the Catholic Church maintains that sexual encounters are meant to be between a man and his wife and for the purpose of reproduction only, Meehan's poetry uses that same process as metaphor for the creation of poems rather than children. The sexualization of her poetry and the writing process is thus both a result and a deliberate subversion of the repressive forces facing women in an Irish Catholic culture.

The influence of Catholicism in Ireland, and thus Meehan's life, has been a strong one. With an overwhelming 87.4% of its citizens recognized as Catholic today, Ireland has long been considered a historically religious country. In fact, the state and church policies were so intimately linked that the Irish government did not lift the constitutional ban on divorce until 1995, and still continues to impose a punishment of life imprisonment for any woman obtaining an abortion in Ireland. (Clarity, CNN) Although the Catholic influence of Ireland is seen to have slipped in recent years, during the time that Meehan was attending school and beginning to write poetry, the hold was even stronger. Gayle Rubin, considered to be one of the founders of sex-positive feminism, maintained that much of the Western stigma and labeling surrounding sexuality is a result of the Christian view that, "following Paul, holds that sex is inherently sinful. It may be redeemed if performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if the pleasurable aspects are not enjoyed too much." (Rubin, 150) Thus, the stigmatizing of public sexuality in Ireland makes the overtly sexual tones in Meehan's poetry all the more provocative in her public praise of sex and sexuality. With the

rich literary history in the likes of Yeats and Kavanagh, poetry is often seen as something inherently Irish (though possibly also inherently male). By interweaving the infamously Irish art of poetry with explicitly sexual scenes and tones, Meehan subverts the stigma of sexuality and turns the oppressive influences into an individual style with powerful messages about the creation of poetry.

The link between Meehan's sexualized poetry and the repression of sexuality in Irish Catholic culture and literature contains many parallels to the American feminist sex-positive movement. Wendy McElroy, a sex-positive author, claimed that the pro-sex movement in the early 1980s began as an outlet of frustration after feminists failed in different governmental sectors. With the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 and abortion rights coming under attack by the Reagan administration, McElroy posited that the fight for positive and public representation of women's sexuality became a central issue to change perceptions in the public rather than governmental sector. (2) Gayle Rubin agreed, saying in 1982, "The Equal Rights Amendment has been defeated, legislation has been passed that mandates new restrictions on abortion, and funding for programs like Planned Parenthood and sex education has been slashed." "Paradoxically," Rubin says, "an explosion of exciting scholarship and political writing about sex has been generated in these bleak years." (147-8) As a result of tighter constraints, feminists turned to the expression of sexuality in a positive light in order to combat the obstructions barring them from complete gender equality. In this way, just as the pro-sex feminists did in the early 1980s and beyond, Meehan turned to expressing her sexuality in her poetry as a means to subvert the national view that stigmatized sexuality, especially female sexuality. Thus she

turned the limiting forces of inhibiting sexuality outward, using them against the institutions that created them.

By comparing the act of writing poetry to a sexual encounter and the poem to a child, she is undermining the very foundations that underlie the Catholic Church's views towards sex and sexuality. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states "fornication is carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of persons and of human sexuality." (Catechism, 2353) In this way, the church's views sex and sexuality as an act of procreation only, which can only take place between a married couple. That Meehan compares sex to the creation of poetry is an ironic twist to the Catholic Church's stance on procreation. These subversions come to light in "Whore" and are taken a step further in their allusions. As discussed above, the reference to the Catholic story of the Annunciation of Mary and the conception of Jesus obviously brings attention to her reversal of the Catholic ideal of procreation.

This is important in a biographical context as well. Despite Meehan's Catholic upbringing, the subjects and themes of many of her poems and collections and her interest in counter-Irish influences such as neo-shamanism prove that she sought alternative paths to spirituality other than Christianity. One of these important sources was Buddhism. In an interview with Jody Allen Randolph, Meehan admits that Buddhism gave her a "powerful support system" when she "couldn't have had any kind of a spiritual life within Catholicism." Though she maintains that she had a great respect for the piety of some of the devout Catholics in her life, she turned from the religion, seeing it as "septic, the whole patriarchy, the priesthood, the role in our culture, the way I saw my mother's generation churning out children because they were denied access to contraceptives." Meehan said the

oppression of the church was too much for her, adding that she “just couldn't handle the whole patriarchal thing, the hierarchy of these men in skirts calling the shots.” After experiencing the repression of the Catholic Church in Ireland, she felt “there was no way I could go to the church after about fourteen or so.” At a very young age, Meehan became “very disaffected from the church.” (Allen Randolph, Interview, 248-9) The influence of the Catholic Church in Meehan’s life was not one of devotion and spirituality, but rather of politics and patriarchy. Thus, the urge to overthrow and undermine the repressive doctrines of Catholicism through poetry would come as no surprise.

Instead of conforming to the deeply ingrained Catholic teaching that sexual activity is solely for the procreation of children, Meehan subverts that idea by using the metaphor of conception as the act of writing poetry. She defies the Catholic idea that sex and procreation are one and the same by intrinsically linking sex and poetry. The resistance is made even stronger by her allusion to the Catholic narrative of the Annunciation. This is yet another way that she has taken the oppressive forces surrounding her, turned them outward, and used the same forces to resist the institution that has created them, much in the same way she translated her mother’s influence and the world of the domestic into powerful poetry.

VII. RETHINKING AND RESISTING TRADITION

In her poetry that discusses her creative process, Paula Meehan uses an extended metaphor, comparing the act of writing poetry to the act of conceiving a child. This overarching analogy applies to each facet of the writing process, from pre-writing as peace, to inspiration as sexual intercourse, to conception as writing. This places the poem on the

level of the child, and herself in the role of the mother, raising the status of both. The metaphor also alludes to the story of the Catholic Annunciation of Mary, which not only overturns the traditional catholic roles of women and views on sexuality and procreation, but also again reinforces Meehan's view that poetry is spiritual, and inherently indefinable.

This metaphor accomplishes multiple obvious and still other subtle subversions of the oppressive powers against her gender and her poetic authority. By inverting the traditional idea of a certain conception of women, conception, sexuality, and poetry, Meehan once again reflects her ability to transform and control the oppression and repression surrounding the Catholic and Irish culture. Thus, by challenging the authority of these assumptions and ideas, Meehan herself gains poetic authority. These poems yet again prove that Meehan has a talent for transforming the oppressive into powerful poetry.

CONCLUSION: FROM MUSE TO CREATOR

Margaret Kelleher, in her essay "Writing Irish Women's Literary History," defines "oppositional" literature as writing by an author who is a part of the minority in a given canon. This oppositional literature is that "which calls into question the very terms through which canonical literature is defined." (Kelleher, p.6) "Oppositional" is an apt description of Paula Meehan's poetry, for more than just its obvious parallel to this definition. Much of her poetry does in fact raise questions as to "the very terms through which canonical literature is defined." From her overtly sexual work to her expression of counter-Irish influences, her inclusion as a canonical "Irish" poet certainly pushes the boundaries of what defines Irish canon. In this Kelleher would consider Meehan an oppositional poet. However, Meehan's poetry is oppositional in almost every sense of the word. Throughout her work, there is a clear tone of opposition and resistance to the repressive forces that surrounded her, whether they be familial, religious, institutional, sexual, or canonical. The drive to oppose the powers that would challenge her poetic authority is a clear presence and catalyst behind much of her writing, especially the poetry that discusses the mother and the creation of poetry.

This opposition is clear not only in the effect of the poetry on the reader, but as we have seen, it is necessary in the establishment of poetic authority. This is especially true in the case of poets in the minority of a poetic canon, such as Irish women. Meehan shows that she is poetically able to take control of the repressive forces around her, and turn them against the institutions that created them. Nowhere is this clearer than in her reversal of the traditional roles of women in Irish and Catholic tradition.

In both her allusions to Catholic doctrines and figures and her placement of the woman in the role of creator, Meehan changes the perceptions and stereotypes that pervade Irish culture and poetry. Essential to her own writing process, and to the encouragement of future female poets, Meehan's establishment of poetic authority for the female voice is reflected in the subversion of oppressive female archetypes.

Gilbert and Gubar claim that female poets encounter two feminine stereotypes present in a substantial amount of male-written literature: the angel and the monster. In order to find the authority to write "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her." (p.17) They argue, "There is a clear line of literary descent" of these stereotypes, "passing through (among many others) Dante, Milton, and Goethe." The images are limiting to the female writer, who cannot live up to the ideal of the angel. The image of the monster, then, places a negative personification on the part of the woman that refuses to fall in line with that ideal. Thus, "the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to allay 'his' anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend monster) and simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained place" (p. 28).

One of the most obvious examples of this poetic tendency, and one of the first sources where Meehan would have encountered it, is the Bible. Between the two testaments, there are two main female characters; in the first testament it is Eve, in the second it is Mary. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, presents Eve as the woman who brought sin into the world. This is contrasted in the next testament with the Virgin Mary,

the “immaculate” woman who brought the savior into the world. These two classifications of women are reinforced in the Irish tradition, because of their prominence in scripture. However, Meehan’s poetry undermines these over-simplified labels by writing a more complex and authoritative portrayal of herself, and women in general. Her poetry shows women in different roles, not just the binary characterizations of Eve and Mary. In her poems on the domestic, such as “The Pattern” and “Grandmother, Gesture” she shows the complexity of the women in her life. Her more personal, sexual poetry moves the subject from the Catholic, Virgin Mary ideal to a more sexualized, powerful, creative human being. She then reclaims the divergent stereotypes of “Virgin” and “Whore” in her work “On Poetry.” These two opposing stereotypes used to label women are contrasted with the actual subject of both of the poems: the creation of poetry by a woman.

Similar to the scripture’s portrayal of the supposed role of women, the use of the woman as the muse and representation of the “nation” as a female also over-simplifies the perception of women in poetry. This trend is something Eavan Boland noticed as restricting to the female Irish poet, saying that the “association of the feminine and the national” caused the “subsequent simplification of both.” When reading male Irish poets, Boland says in *Outside History*, she was disappointed in the lack of an adequate female model in their work. Much in the style of the Virgin Mary, “the women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status” and explains how she was unable to relate to these lofty stereotypes. The muse in male poetry is often a central figure, one that offers inspiration, love, respect, and at times temptation. As Eavan Boland reinforces, “The majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry.” The pervasive symbolism of a “Lady Ireland” (or any other nation for that matter) in poetry and culture

created an ideal very similar to the Catholic model of the Virgin Mary; and both have been used as muses countless times in poetry. (Allen Randolph, *Sourcebook*, 72)

Gilbert and Gubar also recognize that the use of a muse becomes a complicated subject for a woman, since in the male-centric traditions, a woman is the muse. The image of the muse becomes problematic because it places poetic authority solely in the hands of the male poet. As muses or “Cyphers” the “women are defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power” and are merely the tools through which the male poets receive inspiration. (21) Who then does the woman choose for inspiration? And how does the female place herself in the poem? Meehan, as Boland before her, seems to attempt to overturn this model of creation, by using a male as a muse and fixing the female firmly in the creative, authoritative position.

Her series “On Poetry” transfers the role of women in Irish poetry from muse to creator, giving the power to the woman and reversing the authority of traditional male poetry. The titles are obviously female, (“Virgin”, “Mother”, “Whore”) but they are written from the point of view of the female, not as inspired by the woman. Often, in male-written poetry the writer is visited by a muse who represents poetic inspiration. This is seen as far back as Greek literature where the goddess or muse is the site of inspiration. In Meehan’s case, however, the figure that represents poetic inspiration is male, while the creator is female. In “Virgin” she describes poetry as a man, explaining the time when “*he* first came to” her. In “Whore” then she compares the poem to a child, but specifically a male child, saying “a boy turns beneath me, consolatory and strange.” Thus Meehan undermines the over-simplification of the female stereotypes that often confine women to either the angel

or monster, Mary or Eve, by reversing the male use of the poetic muse. Instead of the woman being the passive inspiration, the role of the female is one of power and creation.

Possibly the most oppositional aspect of Paula Meehan's poetry is just this consequence: the movement of the female from the muse to the creator. This represents Meehan's own journey towards poetic authority, as well as the ultimate challenge of the female voice in Irish poetry. Describing this recent transformation in Irish poetry, in the introduction to *Three Irish Poets*, Eavan Boland states, "women's voices are now deeply marked on Irish poetry. I cannot believe that anyone who loves Irish literature, and its long struggle towards the light, would wish it otherwise" (xviii) Meehan's poetry aptly depicts this struggle, and the eventual gain of poetic authority for the female writer by displacing and subverting the oppressive and repressive forces that surrounded her.

To say that Meehan's poetry is "oppositional" in the manner that Margaret Kelleher suggests is certainly fitting. To say that Meehan's poetry is oppositional in how it reflects the struggles and resistances to patriarchy, hierarchy, repression, and exclusivity is the obvious connection within much of her poetry. The poems included in this thesis are the ones that I felt brought these facets of opposition closest to the surface.

My attempt was to present these poems in an unfettered way and offer analysis and context following them. A contextualization of the historical, canonical, and familial forces that have surrounded Meehan's poetry brings her ability to subvert and gain poetic authority even further to light. While this thesis focused on this oppositional aspect of her poetry, I wished to also present a loose model for a larger scale sourcebook. This sourcebook would contain excerpts from her poetry, plays, prose and interviews, as well as

a contextual background, much in the style of Jody Allen Randolph's *Eavan Boland: A Sourcebook*.

I felt that the theme of opposition and resistance, besides being exceedingly prevalent in Paula Meehan's work, was an important subject to focus on to shed light upon the struggle of the female voice in Irish poetry over the past few generations, to show how Meehan's creative process was altered by this struggle, and to prove that poetry can be an effective resistance against norms of authority. This has significance for the future generations of female Irish poets, as well as the voices of minorities in any poetic canon. In my own interview with Paula Meehan, she told me that the challenges of the female poet in Ireland applied to "everyone, not just women" who "should feel they have the authority to write." She said that this poetic authority is relevant in the case of everyone from the Irish woman to "the boy in the inner city, the child who has problems with grammar, the guy in prison for life, the minority, the student with a low threshold for boredom; the people that the institutions forget about. Any person should feel free to create."

I have argued throughout this thesis that the voice of the female poet is progressively redefining Irish poetry, and that Meehan's poetry has reflected a large portion of this with many counter-Irish influences. As Boland says, in the works of the women included in *Three Irish Poets*, "it is possible at times to see a new Ireland creeping to the edges of the poems and then slipping inside with a word, a phrase, a reference." (xi) This new Ireland is being created by those who had previously been denied the power to shape it. However, Ireland has long been a country defined, not by the oppression of colonization or kings, but by its ability to withstand and resist those forces. Its people have always been categorized by their endurance and strength in the face of challenge and

struggle. Maybe this new Ireland, the new Irish canon, is not new at all, but the most recent cycle of oppressive forces and the reaction of the people and the poets against them. With a longstanding tradition of perseverance, fortitude and art this newest change in Irish poetry may be just one of the ways in which poets, such as Paula Meehan, reflect the Irish spirit.

In many ways, Meehan's poetry and the development of poetic authority for the female poet in Ireland is a beacon of hope for those who feel they do not have the authority to create. Her poetry shows, above all, that though oppression has an effect on poetry, the poet has the ability to affect oppression. I feel it is only fitting to end with the following quote from my interview with Paula Meehan, which I feel summarizes the struggle to gain poetic authority for any person, the effect of oppressive forces on creativity, the poet's ability to overcome these forces, and thus the very argument of this thesis:

"Sometimes language is all you have and all you can use. No matter who you are, you have to fight for the right to be a poet, but it's obvious that certain people have to fight harder. Poetry allows a person to bring experience into language, to speak with power. The powerful are afraid of truth, and that's the beauty of poetry and language: it comes from the people themselves. Sometimes, maybe oftentimes, oppression produces art and poetry. If language is all you have, your ideas come under pressure and it becomes your one way of representation. All people should feel free enough to write and to speak, to have a voice."

PAULA MEEHAN INTERVIEW 6/14/11 ALLIHIES, IRELAND

This interview with Paula Meehan was conducted by Ginnelle Sroka during a trip to Allihies on June 14, 2011.

Q: Would you say that Irish women have been excluded or oppressed within the Irish canon? And has there been progress made to reverse that in the past few generations of female poets in Ireland?

A: "I like to say that it's not a glass ceiling, it's a granite ceiling. Each generation of women has to find a way to chip away at it, word by word. And Eavan Boland was a pioneer in this. But, there is still such an argument that goes on about the 'fair' representation of women in Irish poetry. Each generation still has to struggle to maintain the gains we've made. Now is a great time of promise for looking at the past with new eyes. However, we have to be careful of regression. Progress is still needed. Recently, younger generations of scholars and critics, many of them women, have 'attacked' so to speak, Eavan Boland's work. They say it was too focused on oppression, or that they only reason it is recognized is for the claims of oppression. What they fail to recognize is that without the work of people like Eavan Boland, they wouldn't have that space that they write in now. I still have hope in the future of Irish women poets. They will have to continue to draw the line and to occupy the space and push it even further. Overall, I feel that in the past two or so generations have created a movement and an energy towards the recognition of the female voice that cannot be overturned. "

Q: How did the idea for the *Three Irish Poets* anthology come about? How is the anthology important or different from others?

A: "It was Eavan's idea to compile the three of our works into a teaching text. It was difficult to find one place where you could access Eavan's, Mary's, and my poetry. The title I think speaks to the intent of the anthology. It is titled Three Irish Poets, not Three Irish Women Poets. Again, it's an example of creating a space if it's not created for you. I honestly don't remember how I chose my own poems; I just picked the ones that I thought were most relevant to the anthology. When Eavan came to me with the idea, I thought it was a necessary endeavor and Carcanet has published many of our poems."

Q: Did the additional struggle of being a female poet ever make you angry or bitter? Did you feel it was more difficult for you to gain poetic authority with that additional barrier?

A: "I feel when you're excluded you can be angry, or you can use those angers as energy. You know, when I was young I was angry about not having a space, not feeling like I had the authority or the right to write. I have long made peace with my anger, but I recognize the massive injustices that have plagued certain dialogues. And its not just gender, its class, religion, race; you name it. I believe that everyone, not just women, should feel that they have the authority to write. I mean the black boy in the inner city, the child who has problems with grammar, the student with a low threshold for boredom; the people that the institutions forget about. Any person should be free to create. Sometimes language is all you have and all you can use. No matter who you are, you have to fight for the right to be a poet, but it's obvious that certain people have to fight harder. Poetry allows a person to bring experience into language, to speak with power. The powerful are afraid of truth, and that's the beauty of poetry and language: it comes from the people themselves. Sometimes, maybe oftentimes, oppression produces art and poetry. If language is all you have, your ideas become under pressure and it becomes your one way of representation. All people should feel free enough to write and to speak, to have a voice."

BIBLIOGRAPHY & REFERENCES

Allen Randolph, Jody. *Eavan Boland: A Sourcebook*. Manchester, Great Britain: Carcanet Press Limited, 2007. Print.

Allen Randolph, Jody. "Paula Meehan: A Selected Bibliography." *An Sionnach*. 5.1&2 (2009). <https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/an_sionnach/v005/5.1.randolph.html>.

Allen Randolph, Jody. "Paula Meehan: Text and Context." *An Sionnach*. 5.1&2 (2009): 1-12. Web. <https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/an_sionnach/v005/5.1.randolph.html>.

Allen Randolph, Jody. "The Body Politic: A Conversation with Paula Meehan." *An Sionnach*. 5.1&2 (2009): 239-271. Web. <https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/an_sionnach/v005/5.1.randolph01.html>.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence, A Theory of Poetry*. Second. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.

Boland, Eavan, Paula Meehan, and Mary O'Malley. *Three Irish Poets*. Manchester, Great Britain: Carcanet Press Limited, 2003. Print.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. Part Three: Life in Christ, Section Two: The Ten Commandments, Chapter Two "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF"; Article 6, The Sixth Commandment. Vatican Archives. n. 2353. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm

Clarity, James F. "Irish Vote to End the Divorce Ban by a Tiny Margin." *New York Times* 26 November 1996, Web. 19 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/11/26/world/irish-vote-to-end-the-divorce-ban-by-a-tiny-margin.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>.

CNN Wire Staff. "Court condemns Irish ban on abortion." *CNN World* 16 December 2010, Web. 19 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/12/16/ireland.abortion.ruling/index.html>>.

Deane, Seamus. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. Vol. 1. Dublin: Field Day Books, 1990. Print.

Fitzgerald-Hoyt, Mary; Gonzalez, Alexander G. Introduction to *Irish Women Writers: An A-to-Z Guide*. 1. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006. 1-7. Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Second ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. Print.

Gonzalez Arias, Luz Mar. "'Playing with the Ghosts of Words: An Interview with Paula Meehan.'" *Atlantis*. 22.1 (2000): 187-204. Web. 9 Feb. 2012.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054978?seq=12&Search=yes&searchText=Boland&list=hide&searchUri=/action/doBasicSearch?filter=iid%3A10.2307%2Fi40046998&Query=Boland&Search.x=0&Search.y=0&wc=on&prevSearch=&item=1&ttl=1&returnArticleService=showFullText&resultsServiceName=null>>.

Kelleher, Margaret. "Writing Irish Women's Literary History." *Irish Studies Review*. 9.1 (2001): 1-10. Web.

McElroy, Wendy. *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*. 1. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. eBook.

Meehan, Paula. *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*. Foreword by Eavan Boland. Cheney, WA: Eastern Washington University Press, 1994. Print.

Meehan, Paula. *Dharmakaya*. Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2002. Print.

Meehan, Paula. *Mysteries of the Home*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 1996. Print.

Meehan, Paula. *Painting Rain*. Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2009. Print.

Meehan, Paula. Personal Interview. Ginnelle Sroka 14 06 2011.

Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." 147-8. <<http://wmst419.drkissling.com/winter2011/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Rubin1984.pdf>>

The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, King James Version. New York: American Bible Society: 1999.

*The poems in this thesis were reprinted with the expressed permission of Paula Meehan and Wake Forest University Press. The following are transcripts of the emails in which I received permission.

Paula Meehan paulameehan@eircom.net 12/9/11

to me

Dear Ginnelle,

How are you? Busy it sounds like.

I appreciate your interest in my work and I'm sure it is alright for you to use the poems. I can give outright permission for you to use any poems from my early collections, but if you want to use poems from either *Painting Rain* or *Dharmakaya* you would need to contact Wake Forest University Press (they have an online site with contact details.) The person to contact is Candide Jones and you can tell her I said it was cool. Providing, as you say, the thesis is contained.

I don't know that I have much to offer by way of advice. It really is important for you to feel free in the face of the work to take it in whatever way it speaks to you. I mostly hope you enjoy the process.

An Sionnach a literary journal (now defunct, I think) with a strong Irish bent has done a special double issue on my work in both poetry and drama. (*An Sionnach* means *The Fox*) This might be useful to you - it includes a long interview with me by the editor, an Irish Studies scholar by name of Jody Allen Randolph as well as a fairly comprehensive bibliography and it is available online at Project Muse - http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/an_sionnach/toc/ans.5.1.html - should bring you to it.

I would be delighted to read your thesis. However I would not need to approve it. I would point out any serious errors of fact if there were any. You should, indeed must!, be free to form opinions of the work and to respond creatively and imaginatively to the poems.

Theo and Tony are well and working away in the poetry mines. I'll pass on your good wishes.

I hope you have a lovely midwinter break and that all is well with you and yours,

Sincere good wishes,

Paula

12/09/11

Greetings, Ginnelle,

If Paula says it's cool, then it's cool with us. Good luck with the paper.

Candide Jones

--

Wake Forest University Press

PO Box 7333

A5 Tribble Hall

Winston-Salem, NC 27109

[336.758.5448](tel:336.758.5448) fax [336.758.5636](tel:336.758.5636)

www.wfu.edu/wfupress

Academic Vita of Ginnelle Sroka

Ginnelle Sroka
3651 Chesterfield Rd.
Philadelphia, PA 19114
Gls194@psu.edu

Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree in English, Penn State University, Spring 2012
Minor in Sociology
Honors in English
Thesis Title: "The Granite Ceiling": Discourses of Gender and Oppression in the Poetry of Paula Meehan
Thesis Supervisor: Jessica O'Hara

Related Experience:

Editorial Assistant/Communications Intern for Penn State Dickinson School of Law
Supervisor: Crystal Stryker
Summer 2010

Staff Writer for the Florence Newspaper
Supervisor: Kayla White
Spring 2011

Special Projects Writer for Penn State University Police and Public Safety
Supervisor: Rebecca Bywater
October 2011-Present

Awards:

Paterno Fellow
Benjamin Cantwell Liberal Arts Scholarship 2010-2012
Summer Discovery Grant Recipient 2011
Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant Recipient 2011
Liberal Arts Enrichment Award Recipient 2010
Dean's List
Phi Eta Sigma Honors Society

Presentations/Activities:

Keynote Speaker, Paterno Fellows Recognition Ceremony January 2011
Study Abroad in Florence, Italy at the Institute at Palazzo Rucellai
Thesis Research conducted in Ireland Summer 2011