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Fathers and Sons, Mothers and Daughters: The family romance in Katherine Cecil Thurston's *The Fly on the Wheel*

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Katherine Cecil Thurston's *The Fly on the Wheel* (1908) offers a highly unusual depiction of the life of the Catholic bourgeoisie in provincial Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century, a time of enormous social and political upheaval. In her novel, Thurston depicts a tightly controlled society dedicated to social advancement and eager to grasp the opportunities available to the swelling numbers of the middle class, a class which, according to the novel 'by right of strength has formed its huge republic, and spread like a net over civilisation – invincible, indispensable as the vast machines from which it has sucked its power'.[1] The universality of bourgeois advancement is both proclaimed by Thurston but also given a local inflection in her comment on the fact that, in Ireland, the barriers previously placed in the path of aspirant Catholics create an even more determined focus on the prize of social status and respectability: 'there is incentive in the thought of a forced passage, and the constant sight of a social Mecca stirs this section of a naturally indolent community to unprecedented action' (p. 3).

Some of the contradictions in the mentality of this class, particularly at the moment of the novel's publication (just prior to the revolutionary events triggered by the 1916 Rising) are captured in the tension between the desired 'social Mecca' and the notion of a 'forced passage'. Thurston here evokes the uneasy coexistence of the desire for social status, a concept that was in Ireland impossible to disentangle from long-standing colonial structures, with the resentment of those held in subordinate positions by those very structures. The description of Irish Catholics as 'naturally indolent' in fact reflects the pervasive presence of

colonial stereotypes in Irish culture. The narrator's comment can also, however, be read in terms of desire and repression. The 'social Mecca' that is pursued requires the repression of more primitive drives and forces, hinted at in the violence inherent in the idea of a 'forced passage'. In order to overcome social inferiority and subordination, it seems, the Catholic bourgeoisie must repress destructive rage and channel it into socially sanctioned 'action'. The Freudian concepts of repression and sublimation invoked here are, I argue, vital to an understanding of Thurston's novel, which explores the Irish bourgeoisie by means of the psychosexual formation and experience of individual subjects. As I intend to show, Thurston in fact offers an unusually clear-sighted portrayal of the fundamental contradiction identified first by Freud – the fact that 'the gendered human subject … is inherently at odds with itself' and that 'what we call our identity … is always unstable, always at risk of sabotage from the unacceptable feelings of loss and desire which we have to repress into our unconscious in order to conform to the demands of culture'.[2]

Thurston's interest in sexuality as a force in the lives of individuals and societies is not surprising given her position as a *fin-de-siècle* writer and a 'New Woman' novelist, but *The Fly on the Wheel* is something of an anomaly in her career both because of its exclusively Irish location and also because of its stringent realism and unusually pessimistic tone. Her other work, most notably her last novel *Max*, displays what Gerardine Meaney has called 'anger, energy and passionate optimism'.[3] Tina O'Toole, likewise, discussing Thurston in the context of New Woman writers, describes how she and writers like her 'imagined new relationships and gender roles in the familiar social world' and 'sought to challenge the heterosocial *status quo*'; she also notes the affinities between New Woman fiction and Utopian fiction.[4] Meaney, in fact, effectively dismisses *The Fly on the Wheel* by noting that it appears 'to indicate a turn to social realism and pessimism' and that the publication of *Max*

two years later ‘can be read as an emphatic recovery from both afflictions’.[5] More recently, however, Whitney Standlee has described the novel as Thurston’s ‘most accomplished work’ and stresses the fact that its ‘portrayals and preoccupations balance precariously on the cusp between two centuries and two eras’.[6] Stylistically, the novel’s realism and its meticulous rendering of the bourgeois social world make evident its roots in Victorian fiction. But the novel is also committed to exploring the characters’ internal worlds and desires, in a way that lays bare the psychic costs of social conformity. Freud paradoxically described as ‘normal’ a process involving loss, rage and repression, and Thurston’s realistically faithful Waterford location has precisely the same quality: its solid ‘reality’ co-exists with the acknowledgement of interior, psychic realities that house unattainable desires and violent fantasies. *The Fly on the Wheel* is undoubtedly more pessimistic than Thurston’s other novels about the potential to challenge heteronormative and patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality. However, it can also be read as a form of protest against the absence of any possibility of feminine subjectivity in the Ireland of the period outside of the role of wife and mother. Freud’s theories provide a developmental narrative, but one that is – notoriously – premised on a masculine subject, a subject that is shown in the novel to be compatible with the aspirations of the rising Catholic bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *The Fly on the Wheel* is an exceptional novel in that it confronts the absence of a female-centred plot and registers a protest against this absence. Thurston’s novel is thus a fascinating text to consider alongside the stories of fathers and sons which dominate the literature of the revival period.[7]

In his short essay ‘On Family Romances’ Freud locates the act of storytelling and narration in the gap between desire and reality. In its earliest form, the family romance is the story that the child tells himself in response to anger, frustration or disappointment at the

hands of his parents – he constructs a narrative in which he is a foundling, the offspring of noble and idealised parents, forced to tolerate inferior and inadequate substitutes. The family romance is described by Marianne Hirsch as 'a structure of fantasy – the imaginary construction of plots according to principles of wish fulfillment' developed in response to 'the discrepancies between *social reality* and *fantasy construction*, which are basic to the experience and the institution of family'.[8] According to Hirsch, the family romance 'combines and reveals as indistinguishable the psychological subjective experience of family and the process of narrative'. In Freud's account, the family romance undergoes a crucial modification during the Oedipal phase, when the child, with a new awareness of sex, differentiates between his parents and accepts his real mother as his mother, while continuing to fantasise about an ideal but absent father, and his status thus alters from Foundling to Bastard.[9] Freud's discussion assumes a male child, whose family romance alters and develops according to the classic male Oedipus complex. The shift in status to Bastard, therefore, is accompanied by heightened sexual curiosity and fantasy around his mother, whom the child imagines in 'situations of secret infidelity and … secret love-affairs'.[10] The family romance thus forms part of the process in the formation of male subjectivity, in which otherwise conflicting feelings of admiration and anger towards the father can co-exist through the device of the ideal but absent 'real' father and the inadequate and present 'substitute'. What makes the family romance especially interesting for a discussion of *A Fly on the Wheel* is the suggestion made by Marthe Robert as to the stylistic distinction between the narrative of the Foundling and that of the Bastard. Robert explicitly aligns the second, Oedipal stage of the family romance with realism:

> Insofar as such a writer [Balzac] undertakes to maintain his inventions within the bounds of probability and verisimilitude – which does not mean that he constructs

> a new fraction of reality, but only that, notwithstanding his suppressed destructiveness, he pays homage to things as they are – he submits to the subtle motivations of realism that intervene at the more advanced stage of the Family Romance's development, emulating in fact the Oedipal Bastard.[11]

In *The Fly on the Wheel*, not only is realism of form clearly allied to the 'suppressed destructiveness' inseparable from the Oedipus narrative, but as already noted, Thurston also creates a space within which to register the absence of the daughter's narrative.

The initial pages of *The Fly on the Wheel* overtly establish the novel's realist principles, and yoke them firmly to the central male character, Stephen Carey. The narrative opens with a classic realist statement of time and location – 'It was an April morning in the Irish town of Waterford' (p. 1) – and then goes on to further describe this location:

> Portion of this dusty, characteristic, sparsely-populated town is dedicated to business – the business of the shops; a second and more important portion of it is given over to the quays, from whence a constant traffic is carried on with the hereditary enemy, England; while a third part, that holds itself aloof from commerce, is to be reckoned as half residential, half professional. It is to this third quarter that the eye of the story-seeker must turn on this April morning. (p. 1)

The reference to the 'story-seeker' introduces a high degree of narrative self-consciousness into this minutely detailed realism, as does the ironic comment about the trade between Ireland and England. In the same overt manner the narrator then introduces Stephen Carey, 'hero, in so far as middle-class Irish life produces heroes, of the anticipated romance' (p. 2).

The reference to his role as hero is of course ambiguous – he is both a type of 'ordinary' middle-class hero, and also hero of the 'anticipated romance', the word romance here signalling a significant divergence from the reality so deliberately established by the narrator, and to which, we quickly learn, Stephen has subjected himself. Stephen is the eldest son of Barney Carey, a man who had made a fortune as a builder, and then lost it all. As the eldest son, Stephen takes on the responsibilities of a parent after his ruined father's death and ensures that his six younger brothers are educated and provided for as their father had wished: 'What Stephen did in that tremendous crisis, rather what he did in the long toilsome years, when the actual crisis was passed and the daily burden was still to be carried, is among the unwritten records of heroism' (p. 7).

The identification with the father that according to Freud is essential in order to resolve the Oedipus complex is in Stephen's case very literal and complete – he has in effect become his father. The blatant inadequacy of his father reinforces Stephen's position under the 'reality principle' as he is forced to shed childish illusions, but he receives the rewards that Freud proposes are reserved for the male child who overcomes his rage and jealousy against his father and suppresses his desire for his mother: authoritative and successful masculinity. This much is made strikingly apparent in the novel's opening chapters. The narration of events begins in the breakfast room of Stephen's house in Lady Lane, where his wife Daisy is drinking tea, discussing household matters with the servant, and opening letters. Hearing footsteps, however, she listens closely and 'with the confirmation of their sound she rose from her seat, moving so hastily that the nun's letter fluttered down' (p. 10). The house, and Daisy's life, revolve around Stephen; this is hardly surprising given that the narrator describes him as 'one of those beings to whom it is given to claim consideration by a frown – service by a single word' (p. 11). The opening pages thus establish Stephen as the central

focus, and his perspective, that of a dogged determination ‘to grapple’ (p. 4) with reality and triumph over it, as the guiding, realist perspective. The self-consciousness of the narration and the insistence with which Stephen’s authority is asserted by the narrator make it clear at the same time, however, that it is precisely these same perspectives that will be at play in the ‘anticipated romance’: the ‘story-seeker’ is invoked for a second time to fix his/her attention on:

> a man of thirty-eight – a citizen with a wife and three children – a solicitor with a growing practice – a matured, controlled, successful Stephen Carey, possessing but one responsibility remaining from the past – Frank, the youngest brother, the seventh son, still studying medicine in Paris in fulfillment of Barney Carey’s dream. (p. 7)

The narrator thus signals to the reader that this hard-won, successful present is potentially highly unstable, threatened by a remnant of the past. The potential disruption to the realist narrative is in addition suggested by the folkloric reference to the ‘seventh son’. The threat is not Frank himself – his potential for disruption is easily dispatched by Stephen – but Stephen’s own repressed past, a repression that is released by his meeting with Isabel Costello, the young girl to whom Frank has become engaged.

Like Stephen, Isabel is an orphan, the daughter of Dan Costello, a minor bank official who, like Stephen’s father, failed in his role as provider. Having left her convent school in Paris, Isabel now lives with her aunt, Miss Costello, who attempts to instruct her in the correct demeanour for a girl of very slender means: ‘you know very well that a girl must do what other people do – ’specially if she has no money’ (p. 61). Isabel’s arrival in Waterford is

greeted with a mixture of interest and anxiety, in a predictable response to her combination of beauty and pennilessness.[12] The impact of her arrival on Stephen is immediate and its ripples are felt even before they have met: in the interests of getting to know his enemy, Stephen decides to attend a dance to which she has been invited. His uncharacteristic decision to attend 'made a definite stir of excitement' (p. 21). Stephen's presence is unusual, because in this conservative, provincial society 'the married man hardly exists as an independent being, for he is a thing appropriated, labelled, laid irrevocably on the shelf' (p. 37).

The description of Stephen as a 'thing appropriated' is unexpected and seemingly in tension with the portrayal of his mastery and authority over his wife and family, and his status as a respected citizen. The erasure of the married man as an 'independent being' in the context of the dance thus reveals its function as a carefully staged event designed for ensuring stable social reproduction. It excludes married men, but is presided over by married women, whose presence is supposed to ensure that the sexual energy such events channel remains under control. The subjection of sexual desire to other aims and goals is also made manifest in the account of Stephen's own marriage. Faced with the social expectation that he would marry, we are told that 'it was scarcely to be expected that he would lose his heart or even his head … and he had looked round his little world much as the Eastern might have studied the slave-market' (p. 12). Daisy is selected, 'as gossip had unanimously held' for the financial resources she and her family bring to the marriage, but also for her youth and her 'pretty blue eyes, pretty fair hair', which are to Stephen a matter of 'pride' (p. 12). In exercising control over his desires even in the case of marriage, Stephen determinedly renounces pleasure in favour of 'reality'. His ego's demands are expressed through his 'pride' in the object he has chosen, but his marriage is predicated on the continued repression and denial of desire. Having been convinced by his early experiences that his desires can never be met by reality,

Stephen renounces them and takes necessity instead as his law, turning himself into a servant of civilisation.

Stephen's masculinity is here presented on the one hand as excessive: in the tellingly Orientalist simile he is compared to an 'Eastern' who regards the relationship between women and men in the light of master and slave. On the other hand, however, this hypermasculinity results in a form of self-subjection, a denial of one's own desires and thus, ultimately, a kind of emasculation – the married man as a 'thing appropriated'. Joseph Valente's discussion of manliness in Irish culture at the turn of the century provides an illuminating perspective on this paradoxical masculinity. In Valente's account, manliness (an explicitly English construct) is defined through both the possession of 'animal spirits' and the capacity to govern and channel them: 'the ideal of manhood … consisted in the simultaneous necessity for and achievement of a vigilant, rational self-control – in *strong passions strongly governed*'.[13] The imperialistic manner in which manliness functioned in this era will be obvious: the fact of political subordination to Britain implies a lack of manliness on the part of those subordinated, the need to be governed by rulers who are defined by their capacity to self-govern. The familiar nineteenth-century images of the Irish as either simian and subhuman, or as feminised and passive, construct them as either excessive in their animal nature or as lacking in the 'passions' and 'spirits' which are also an essential element of manliness. The description of Stephen as an 'Eastern' positions him as a colonial subject, lacking in civility, but ultimately his lack of manliness lies in the *excessive* control he exercises over himself, a control that renders him servile and neutered.

The excessive nature of Stephen's self-regulation suggests the fragility of his apparently 'mature' mastery of his desires, which is then exposed upon his initial meeting with Isabel. Her first appearance, to both Stephen and the reader, is in the middle of a dance,

where she is described as ‘a flower swaying in the wind, a young animal stretching itself to the sun, a bird in its first flight’ (p. 39): she is in other words the representative of Nature, the antithesis of the culture and civilisation to which Stephen has dedicated and subjected himself. Isabel is also portrayed as driven by instinct and desire: ‘she saw nothing beyond the stirring perspective of light and colour, heard nothing but the swaying music of the waltz that swelled and faded in waves of sound’ (p. 39). Stephen’s erotic attraction to her is instantaneous, and its source is obvious: her unusual, uninhibited behaviour reawakens in him his own long-suppressed, renounced desires. Through its portrayal of Stephen, *The Fly on the Wheel* offers an unusually sophisticated reflection on the interplay between class, gender and nationality at a critical juncture in Ireland’s history, revealing the complexity of claims to leadership and authority precisely at the time in which the contest over the legitimate governance of Ireland was reaching its decisive moment. The narrative is unusual in its focus on the self-divided nature of Irish masculinity, but it is even more unusual in its depiction of a femininity that challenges this masculinity at a point at which it was poised to assume the position of leadership which had been denied under colonial structures.

The extent to which the ideological struggles taking place in Ireland in the early twentieth century are part of the social context inhabited by Thurston’s characters is revealed in a scene which anticipates both Joyce’s ‘The Dead’ and the Christmas dinner-table scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Stephen’s brother-in-law, Tom Norris, is an enthusiastic Gaelic revivalist, and he, Stephen and Father Cunningham debate the movement over a dinner at which Isabel is also present. Stephen is dismissive of attempts to ‘send Ireland back to school’ in order to gaelicise it, arguing instead that the country should be ‘souse[d] with modern thought – Spencer and Huxley, Haeckel and Kant’ (pp. 105–6).[14] This brings him into conflict with the priest, who predictably reacts against these ‘dangerous

writers' (p. 106). These discussions are clearly represented as being part of the masculine domain: while the men discuss 'serious' topics, Isabel is positioned as an ill-informed, female onlooker who exclaims, 'What is it you're talking about? … I'd simply love to know!' (p. 103). There is, however, narrative irony at work here, which undercuts the apparently hierarchical arrangement of masculine and feminine spheres that structure these scenes, and the 'world' of the novel as a whole.

Below the surface of this seemingly significant discussion of politics and ideas, libidinal currents propel the characters' actions. Tom expresses support for women's involvement in the movement, asserting at dinner that 'it's sickening to think of what women could do – and don't, just because the thing isn't fashionable!' (pp. 100–1), and he later addresses himself directly to Isabel: 'I wish, Miss Costello, you'd interest yourself in the cause. If we could only induce the educated women to take it up seriously, we could move mountains' (p. 118). This laudable and seemingly progressive stance is undermined by the fact that Tom's interest in Isabel is not simply or even primarily in her ability to contribute to the cause: he is clearly attracted to her, but his only means of gaining her attention is apparently to attempt to rouse a Gaelic enthusiasm in her. Having manoeuvred himself into the position of chaperone as she walks home, he confesses that he found Waterford 'a bit narrow' (p. 117) when he returned from university, but it seems clear that his passion for the Gaelic revival has successfully sublimated any troublesome desires. Tom's efforts are rendered comical by the fact that in his case, the Gaelic movement is an obvious strategy of containment: one of the dinner guests comments approvingly that he has 'such nice quiet tastes, instead of betting and playing cards like so many of the young men' (p. 103). This suggests that, while Tom's patriotism and commitment to the cause have formed a channel in which he can redirect his libidinal energy, the other young men, similarly frustrated in this

limiting and regulated world, divert their energies in other, more potentially troubling ways. The supposedly weighty discussion of Ireland's future is also undercut by the reader's awareness that, for Isabel, the sole focus of interest at this dinner has been Stephen and her own determination to live according to *her* desires. She causes unease, for instance, among the female company over their after-dinner tea by declaring that 'If I cared, I'd marry a beggar; and if I didn't care, it wouldn't matter to me if the person was a king' (p. 110). While Mary Norris, the sister of Stephen's wife, Daisy, displays a passive resentment towards the male discourse at the table – 'What fools men are!' (p. 108) she says, the minute she and the other women are alone – she is resigned simply to grasping at whatever this world can offer her. Isabel's attitude towards the order of things, on the surface simply the naïve ignorance of a girl who has recently left school, is however much more dangerous and destabilising.

Isabel's attraction to Stephen initially appears to be driven by his status as an older, authoritative man, and thus serves to emphasise his masculinity: surrounded by a group of young men competing for her hand in the next dance, Isabel unexpectedly chooses Stephen instead. Stephen's authority is further reinforced by his determination to break off the engagement between Isabel and his brother, Frank. The exercise of this authority confirms Isabel's attraction to him, as she declares to her aunt, 'I'll tell you what Frank is. He's just a shadow of his brother. Only for his brother he wouldn't be there at all' (p. 73). Frank is thus positioned as a son, with Isabel clearly stating her attraction to the powerful 'father' she perceives Stephen to be. At this point, Isabel appears to be constructed according to a classically Freudian paradigm. Freud's account of the development of female sexuality and femininity proposes that the girl's transfer of her attachment, from her mother to her father, is motivated by penis-envy: having realised that she lacks a penis, and that her mother also lacks one and desires the father who possesses one, the girl turns to the father in search of a

penis, and, ultimately (in 'mature' femininity) a baby. Isabel, however, is driven by desires which undercut this apparently conventional feminine position. She passionately rejects her aunt's ideas of what a girl 'must' do: 'I'll never – never do it! I can't cut out my life on a sort of pattern. It must be what I want it to be, or nothing at all' (p. 61). Whereas Stephen's entire sense of self has been built around an accommodation to the disappointments and disillusionments of reality, Isabel demands that the external world conform to her desire: 'it must be *what I want it to be*'. The persistence of such disruptive desires suggests that Isabel is not, after all, a textbook example of Freudian femininity.

Rosalind Minsky points out that later in his career, Freud himself arrived at the conclusion that accounts of female sexuality needed a much fuller consideration of the pre-Oedipal phase, and the girl's intense and enduring attachment to her mother. As Minsky observes, even if the switch from mother to father is made by the girl child, her desire for a penis does not necessarily indicate the erasure of the mother as the primary sexual object: 'at the unconscious level they want the penis from the father *to make them acceptable to their mother*'.[15] Much psychoanalytic theory after Freud has of course focused on pre-Oedipal experience and the mother–child dyad in ways that challenge or complicate his conclusions, and I would argue that in Isabel, *The Fly on the Wheel* offers us a representation of the disruptive force, in a tightly organised, patriarchal society, of a woman whose primary bond to her mother persists.

Isabel's mother at first seems simply to be an absence in the text. She appears to have died in Isabel's very early childhood but no concrete details are given. She is described by another character as 'a Miss Dysart of Derryvane' whose father 'cut her off without a penny' (p. 44) as a punishment for her wayward love match. Of Isabel's father we learn, in the

merciless judgement of Mrs Burke, that he was 'the greatest fool that ever lived. If you made a king of Dan Costello, he'd be begging in the streets the week after!' (p. 44). Significantly, Isabel is openly contemptuous of her late father; she horrifies her aunt by saying that 'if he hadn't said so many prayers … perhaps he might have got promotion in the bank – and left me better off' (p. 63–4). As a result of Costello's inadequacy, Isabel's mother was scorned and excluded by the Waterford bourgeoisie: Mrs Burke recounts cruelly that she 'used to have to turn Dan's old coats for herself when he was done with them! But all the Wexford people are queer' (p. 44). For Isabel, however, her mother remains ideal and unattainable. When she meets Julia, a servant who remembers her as a child, 'a new look' crosses her face and she asks if Julia knew her mother (p. 99). All Julia can tell her is that she remembers being told 'the handsome-looking lady she was, and the terrible way poor Mr Costello was broke up after her' (p. 99).

In her study of women's narratives, Marianne Hirsch has argued that the silence and the absence of the mother are preconditions for the shaping of a female narrative within the realist novel: 'the fantasy that controls the female family romance is the desire for the female's singularity based on a disidentification from the fate of other women, especially mothers'.[16] Isabel's 'singularity' is certainly allied to her disidentification from other women: she refuses to conform, to play the game, and she insists on using what she calls 'true words', but her aunt sees as 'ugly words' (p. 61). She is sharply distinguished not only from her aunt, who submissively accepts her very low place in the Waterford pecking order, but also from Daisy, the wife and mother whose calm and ordered life she throws into chaos when she initiates an affair with Stephen. Isabel's dangerous singularity could however be regarded not as a rejection of her own mother, but as retribution for her mother's fate. As we have seen, her mother was punished by her father when she chose to marry for love, and as Mrs Burke's

comment makes clear, Waterford society closed ranks against her. She is dismissed as 'queer', and (in a satiric acknowledgement of Irish provinciality) as an 'outsider', from Wexford. These same attitudes are apparent in the response to Isabel, newly arrived from her school in Paris. Mary Norris describes her as 'awfully curious-looking … and a queer sort of light in her eyes, different from other people' (p. 18). She is also described by onlookers at the dance as 'nearly foreign' because 'half the Wexford people have Spanish blood' (p. 38). Isabel's singularity, I would argue therefore, *identifies* her with her mother. Based on this identification, the challenge that Isabel offers to the ordered bourgeois world around her can be read in terms of the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic realms, where the Imaginary 'is part of the personal, bodily, pre-Oedipal world we shared with our mothers, and is pre-verbal, whereas the Symbolic is part of the social, cultural world where we are supposed to be able to achieve an authentic identity and become independent, speaking human subjects'.[17] According to Lacan, however, there is no escape from the Symbolic, and no possibility to articulate an alternative to it, since it is only through entering the Symbolic that we become speaking subjects. In spite of the fact that women have no subject position as such within the Symbolic, they must nonetheless enter into it, 'as the "other", a defective version of a human subject'.[18] This dilemma is apparent in *The Fly on the Wheel* in the fact that much of Isabel's significance as a character is founded on her position as the object of male desire.

In the novel, the Symbolic, the realm of culture, law and language, can clearly be associated with Stephen, the authoritative father who is characterised by his confrontation with the 'realities' of life. However, the fact that his position within the Symbolic is predicated on the repression of desire is illuminated by a glimpse into his childhood memories in a scene which is located in the text, significantly, immediately prior to his first meeting with Isabel. Stephen walks alone towards the house where the dance is to be held,

and looking out from the crest of a hill recalls ‘the years of his youth’ when he would climb the scaffolding of his father’s construction works, and ‘looked out over this same city of roofs and spires, weaving with a child’s imagination picture upon picture of the world beyond the confines that formed his home’ (pp. 34–5). Stephen’s decision to take his father’s place has however determined his path in life and means that he has ‘grown to manhood without sight of that great Beyond’ (p. 35). The fact that Stephen’s ‘manhood’ is in fact conditional on his renunciation of desire for the ‘great Beyond’ is further suggested by the view that appears to him, which is not one of roofs and spires, but a ‘vaporous mist’ (p. 35), out of which ‘the phantom rose with its train of stifled hopes pressing up against him, whispering inaudible words, proferring intangible embraces’ (p. 35).The emphasis on formlessness is strongly suggestive of the Lacanian concept of the Real, ‘*that which has not yet been symbolized*, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization’,[19] and the way in which this is linked to desire and Stephen’s ‘stifled hopes’ indicate his imperfect subordination to his place in the Symbolic order. As we have seen, Stephen is on the one hand the epitome of authoritative masculinity, and on the other a colonial subject whose authority relies on a degree of self-regulation that in its severity threatens to compromise this very manliness. The scene is therefore set for his fateful meeting with Isabel, who becomes the object that both awakens and contains his desires. The question that remains is whether the text constructs any possibility of a subject position for Isabel outside of her function as Stephen’s ‘other’.

This question might usefully be considered by comparing *The Fly on the Wheel* to another text which features a ‘Stephen Hero’, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, at the end of which Stephen Dedalus determines to do what Stephen Carey has not, to leave Ireland to embark on an artistic project that is the very definition of grand ambition. As we have already seen, the milieu of *The Fly on the Wheel* is very similar to that which we

find in Joyce's fiction. Like the characters of 'The Dead' and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Thurston's characters are positioned in a very particular historical moment – after the fall of Parnell and the collapse of the Land League, and immediately prior to the events of 1916, in which political radicalism and cultural nationalism combined to change the course of Irish history. Both writers are concerned with what it means to inhabit this particular moment, and with the precise ways in which this reality cramps and pinches. They differ in (at least) two significant ways: Thurston's realism contrasts with Joyce's increasingly experimental modernism, while Thurston's depictions of sexuality and gendered identity are more complex and arguably more radical. These differences can be further teased out by considering each writer's use of the family romance.

A number of critics have drawn attention to the relevance of the family romance to readings of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*.[20] Stephen's quest to become an artist, and thereby discover his 'true' identity, is very evidently a quest for origins, but in the manner of the child constructing his family romance, he rejects his biological father and seeks instead for alternative and ennobling origins. Referring to Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (the text in which Freud's 'Family Romances' was first published), Jean Kimball points out that 'the basic wish of the ego-hero is to break out of the cycle entirely, to beget and be begotten once for all: both only begetter and only begotten', and that in this quest Stephen Dedalus 'embodies the creative ego of the artist as hero'.[21] Writing however from a feminist perspective, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson describes *A Portrait* as 'a Family Romance constructed from the point of view of a young, immature man who rejects the body, materiality, the female, and seeks mastery in an isolated spiritual quest for the real'.[22] Although Lewiecki-Wilson is certainly right to point out that the novel's 'unstable irony' and 'continual displacement of ordering systems' means that a statement such as this can never be

made without admitting that the text also contains its negation, it is undoubtedly true to say that origin in *A Portrait* is conceived of as male and that, in his call to 'old father, old artificer' Stephen 'as rightful inheritor of patriarchal structure … invokes its power to see him through the creation of a new, better, improved human story'.[23]

For Joyce, therefore, unlike Thurston, the alternative can be realised – or if not realised, at least glimpsed and aimed for – and this realisation is enmeshed with a concept of origins and creativity that is based on male genealogies. *The Fly on the Wheel* ends on an entirely different note, with Stephen Carey's renunciation of the liberation that he had sought to access through Isabel. Thurston's novel begins with an image of an inescapable net, the bourgeois society that has 'spread like a net over civilization' (p. 2); in *A Portrait,* on the other hand, Stephen Dedalus famously asserts that 'when the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets'.[24] Stephen's rejection of his own origins in the maternal body, noted by Lewiecki-Wilson, are evident in his Cartesian division of mind and body, made even more explicit in the sentence which immediately precedes his famous declaration: 'The soul is born …, first in those moments I told you of. It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body.'[25] In Thurston's novel Stephen Carey similarly represses his maternal origin (his mother is entirely erased; she is not mentioned even once in the text, which is notable given the extended account of his father's death and the burdens placed on him as a result) but, as I have argued, Isabel's maternal origins *are* present in the novel, and unlike many heroines of realist texts she can be argued to be identified with her mother. Isabel's fixation on Stephen, however, seems to suggest that she accepts the (inevitable) position of women in the Symbolic: 'being what the phallus needs and signifies, a substitute for the mother'.[26] The only way for Isabel to 'be' is to be what

Stephen desires within the phallic economy, which is not hers. The fact that Isabel commits suicide at the end of the novel could therefore be read as her inability to sustain an existence following Stephen's rejection. I would argue, however, that her act of suicide constitutes in fact an articulate statement and a resonant challenge to the crippling limitations of her world.

Having brought his respectable existence to the very brink of destruction, Stephen is recalled to his role by an idealised father, the priest, Fr James. The confrontation between Stephen and Fr James revolves around competing definitions of both subjecthood and masculinity. Asserting that Fr James has never known him, Stephen insists that in contrast to his 'industrious, sensible' exterior, 'far down – fathoms down' he has been 'something quite different': 'I tell you I have had big dreams – I am my father's son!' he exclaims (p. 281). Using images of repression – 'I've kept it under' (p. 281) – Stephen announces his intention to abandon these restraints and reclaim both his status as self-determining subject and as a man. In his efforts to persuade Stephen, Fr James tells him the story of his own life, shaped as a very Catholic morality tale denouncing pride and ambition and advocating humility – having been denied preferment in the church in spite of his acknowledged ability, Fr James now proclaims his gratitude for the simplicity and truth he finds in his poor, rural parish. The priest's 'last arrow', the one that finally succeeds, however, is his reminder to Stephen of his duty as a father, expressed by his own words after Barney Carey's death: 'by God, if ever I have sons of my own, they'll never have a hell of their father's making!' (p. 288). The priest's victory is represented as Stephen's defeat: 'haltingly, unsteadily, after the manner of a man who has suffered a long illness, he walked back to the table, seated himself at his old place, and, throwing his arms out across the scattered papers, let his head fall forward into his hands' (p. 289). In Stephen's world to be a father is, it seems, to submit to powerful restraints.

The intensely ambivalent nature of Stephen's reabsorption within the patriarchal order allows for a more radical reading of Isabel's suicide. In her encounter with Stephen after his painful recall to duty, Isabel is passionate and eloquent, while Stephen is 'silent' and turns from her 'inarticulately' (p. 297), but when she grasps that his settled determination is to resume his stultifying married life, she reaches the end of her ability to verbalise her feelings: 'I wish I had words enough to tell you all I feel. To say that I hate you is nothing – nothing –' (p. 301). Her first impulse is to murder Stephen but at the very last minute she takes the glass of wine she has poisoned in order to drink it herself. Thus the perspective at the end of the novel is with Isabel, rather than with Stephen, and her suicide is presented as an act of mingled defeat and triumph: 'The glass rattled against her teeth, the touch of the ice chilled her lips, but, looking down into the wine, her eyes caught the warmth, the redness, the glory of the sun' (p. 327). Significantly, she expresses herself not in words, which have already been declared inadequate, but in an act, a gesture. The symbolic force of this act should not be overlooked, because in drinking the wine, Isabel subversively repeats the sacrifice of Christ – a figure who is for Otto Rank an archetypal hero of myth. Thus although Isabel's suicide on one level signals the impossibility of her becoming a 'speaking subject' within the current order of things, her gesture is nonetheless a clearly articulated statement. Although transformation cannot be realised within the world of the novel, Isabel's final act ultimately allows us to glimpse an alternative to the reality she has rejected.[27]

The Fly on the Wheel is a novel that deserves a much wider readership. It is not simply a detailed portrayal of the aspiring Catholic middle classes at a critical moment in Irish history, it is a devastating critique of the complex and painful manoeuvres involved in maintaining claims to authority and respectability within a stratified and self-divided society.

As Thurston reveals, these divisions begin in the formation of the self and are constitutive of the bourgeois 'normality' her characters inhabit. Both women and men are victims of these processes, but my reading of the novel suggests that the repression of the mother and female origins is at the root of the painful deformations demanded by 'reality'. Moynagh Sullivan's exploration of psychoanalysis in relation to Irish culture and its institutionalisation has also focused on the 'inability to relate to the mother as a subject' as a characteristic of Irish culture, and she proposes that 'the continued and repeated reinvestment of the father–son plot is central to the production of canons and "traditions" within Irish Studies'.[28] My discussion of *The Fly on the Wheel* in terms of mothers and daughters as well as fathers and sons offers the potential to read the novel in a dialogue with some of the most celebrated and canonical texts of this period, and as a contribution to the narratives of origin which have particular importance in the period of the revival and the literature of modernism in Ireland.

Fathers and Sons, Mothers and Daughters: The family romance in Katherine Cecil Thurston's *The Fly on the Wheel*

[1] Katherine Cecil Thurston, *The Fly on the Wheel* (London: Virago, 1987 [1908]), p. 2. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

[2] Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 26.

[3] Gerardine Meaney, 'Decadence, Degeneration, and Revolting Aesthetics: The fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston', *Colby Quarterly*, vol. 36, 2000, pp. 157–75 (p. 170).

[4] Tina O'Toole, '"Nomadic Subjects" in Katherine Cecil Thurston's *Max*', in Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole (eds), *Irish Literature: Feminist perspectives* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), pp. 79–98 (p. 80, p. 81). For a further discussion of *Max*, see also Tina O'Toole, *The Irish New Woman* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 118–28.

[5] Meaney, 'Decadence', p. 170.

[6] Whitney Standlee, *'Power to Observe': Irish women novelists in Britain, 1890–1916* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2015), p. 133.

[7] Declan Kiberd has discussed the tendency apparent in literature of the Irish revival to create symbolic fathers, in the seeming absence of adequate or effective fathers. See *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), pp. 380–94. Although this is followed by a chapter entitled 'Mothers and Daughters', Moynagh Sullivan points out that it in fact offers no discussion of intergenerational structures among women, thus rendering the mother ineffective as a site of generation. See Sullivan, 'Raising the Veil: Mystery, myth, and melancholia in Irish studies', in Coughlan and O'Toole (eds), *Irish Literature*, pp. 245–77 (pp. 256–8).

[8] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, psychoanalysis, feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 10.

[9] Sigmund Freud, 'Family Romances', in *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay (ed.) (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 297–300.

[10] Ibid., p. 299.

[11] Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 37.

[12] The significance of Isabel's education in a French convent is noted by Ciarán O'Neill and Mai Yatani, 'Women, Ambition. and the City, 1890–1910', in Anna Pilz and Whitney Standlee (eds), *Irish Women's*

Writing, 1878–1922: Advancing the cause of liberty (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 100–20 (p. 115). See also Pilz and Standlee, 'Introduction', pp. 1–16 (pp. 11–12).

[13] Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish Culture, 1880–1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 3. Original emphasis.

[14] With the obvious exception of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the author of several foundational Enlightenment texts, all the writers to whom Stephen refers are linked by a shared interest in Darwinism. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) developed what is referred to as social Darwinism; Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95) was a prominent supporter of Darwin who became known as 'Darwin's bulldog'; Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) was a German biologist who popularised Darwin's theories in Germany. Fr Cunningham's objection to these writers presumably lies in their challenging of conventional religious belief at the time (Huxley, for example, coined the term 'agnostic'), but is also notable that their ideas would now be seen as contributing to a decidedly right-wing social and political agenda, in which Darwin's theory of evolution became allied with notions of superiority and inferiority amongst classes and races. Haeckel was a proponent of scientific racism while Spencer's social Darwinism precluded state intervention to alleviate poverty or promote education.

[15] Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, p. 50 (original emphasis).

[16] Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, p. 10. In his discussion of women's role in the Irish revival, Declan Kiberd states in a very similar vein that 'even the more radical thinkers of the modern age defined the revolt of women in terms of the attempt by wives and daughters to break free of the constricting images of the female devised by men' (*Inventing Ireland*, p. 395). It follows then that in this case the daughter's narrative, as Hirsch argues, is dependent on the silencing of the mother.

[17] Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, p. 142.

[18] Ibid., p. 159.

[19] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between language and jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 25.

[20] See for instance Jean Kimball, 'Family Romance and Hero Myth: A psychoanalytic context for the paternity theme in *Ulysses*', *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 20, 1983, pp. 162–73; Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, *Writing against the Family: Gender in Lawrence and Joyce* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994); Christine Van Boheemen, *The Novel as Family Romance: Language, gender and authority from Fielding to Joyce* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Stephen Sicari, *Joyce's Modernist Allegory: 'Ulysses' and the*

history of the novel (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 142–64; Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 36–54.

[21] Kimball, 'Family Romance', p. 169, p. 170.

[22] Lewiecki-Wilson, *Writing against the Family*, p. 135.

[23] Ibid., pp. 135–6, p. 129.

[24] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Jeri Johnson (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 171.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, p. 159.

[27] Standlee likewise reads this scene as signalling Isabel's 'triumph over the confines of her existence'. '*Power to Observe*', p. 140.

[28] Sullivan, 'Raising the Veil', p. 266, p. 254.