Nicoleta Stanca

Hollywood Gender Representations of Irish America in the 20th Century: Maureen O'Hara and Pierce Brosnan

Abstract: *The article discusses gender representations in the twentieth century Irish-American popular culture. Post-war Hollywood female and male representations are relevant to the process of diasporic identity formation through a constant negotiation between Ireland and Irish America. From the 1960s, for example, Irish masculinity was perceived in terms of violence, which has started to fade away only in the 1990s. Female figures indicate the major role played by Irish women in the aftermath of WWII, whereas, recently, these representations have become rare since they may no longer serve to illustrate diasporic anxieties and desires.*

Key words: *popular culture, Irish America, Ireland, femininity, masculinity*

Gendering nationalism

This paper attempts to discuss the connection between the Irish-American diaspora and Ireland as illustrated through popular culture products, in terms of gender representations. Starting from the general analysis of representations of gender in Irish America provided by Stephanie Rains in her study on *The Irish-American in Popular Culture (1945-2000),* the article will focus on two illustrative figures, Maureen O'Hara and Pierce Brosnan. Rains's key terms in highlighting the major Irish gender representations in films, television and news media have been "fiery colleens" and "fighting Irishmen". These texts may be seen as vehicles for the articulation of values, ideals and anxieties regarding gendered ethnicity in Irish American (popular) culture.

Ethnic and nationalist constructions, whether at home or abroad, as a diaspora, have been seen as focused on gender representations and symbolism and rooted in nineteenth century movements, taken over by twentieth century revivals/ re-visitings. For instance, according to Benedict Anderson, a nation is perceived in terms of a web of ties, loyalty and affection and the terms used with reference to it denote natural bondage: "motherland, *vaterland, patria…"*

(143). Thus, the "imagined community" is persuaded to display filial affection for this maternal or paternal figure of the nation.

Anderson's arguments have been taken over and developed by Andrew Parker in his theory on gendering national identity. Parker shows how relevant to this point is the "depiction of the homeland as a female body whose violation by foreigners requires its citizens and allies to rush to her defense" (in Rains 146). This representation of the nation as woman demands for its efficacy images of innocent, dutiful, daughterly or maternal women. In many cultures, Ireland included, the collective spirit has been symbolized by a mother-figure (e.g. Mother Ireland) or by a daughter-figure (e.g. Erin). With anti-colonial nationalist movements, the symbolism of gender roles becomes more complex. Women are seen as inert, backward-looking, natural, embodying conservative principles and national tradition, whereas men represent the progressive agent of modernity and liberation, as revolutionary, potent, forward-thrusting (in Rains 147). Consequently, with the nation as a construction of femininity, the act of immigration is figured as an act of penetration.

"The Irish-American diaspora, then was formed within the context of a masculinized settler group penetrating the feminized American landscape and creating a new nation" (Rains 148). Beyond this interpretation of historical fact in terms of gender roles, there is another aspect of reality pointing to the act of migration as a sort of masculinisation in the case of the Irish in the USA. There was a shift in status, for the Irish migrants, from being colonial subjects to becoming full citizens. More interesting than the case of men, was that of the first generation Irish women in America because, on the one hand, they were symbolic protectors of national culture, keeping the community around them, and, on the other hand, due to their acquiring of liberal citizenship rights, they were perceived as masculinised in comparison to their European counterparts.

If women representations in the popular culture of the 1930s point to more socially mobile figures, the first generation Irish man was typified in American popular as "Paddy", in the ninetieth century fashion, with his overt masculinity, associated with lawlessness and violence. Each nation seemed to have needed "the other" badly to define itself. Only that, for the Irish, it proved to be rather fatal. In England, in the nineteenth century, the Irish immigrants were expected to conform to these stereotypes and many did so. Coming from the rural communities of Ireland to the industrial centres in England, they found it easier to adopt a mask and resort to duplicity rather than reshape an urban identity of their own. Acting the buffoon, the Irishman must have appeared as a charmful and loveable character to the English worker, who may have hated him otherwise for taking his job. By late nineteenth century, there were about 1 500 000 people of Irish origin only in Liverpool. They indeed took, at least at the beginning, all the unskilled jobs and the poorest areas of English cities, contributing thus to the ethos of Irish "squalor", "rowdiness", "drunkenness" and "violence" (Foster 363).

Master key to the Victorian mind was antithesis; thus, the English delighted in the absolute distinctions they established: man *versus* woman, Englishman *versus* Irishman. The Victorian Englishman attributed to the Irish all those impulses and traits of emotion that his strict code led him to deny himself.

> If John Bull was industrious and reliable, Paddy was held to be indolent and contrary; if the former was mature and rational, the latter must be unstable and emotional; if the Englishman was adult and manly, the Irishman must be childish and feminine. […] either as woman or as child, the Irishman was incapable of self-government. (Foster 246)

This imagery of unreliability, emotional instability and mental disequilibrium were even more damaging than the more overtly offending ones. G. B. Shaw stressed the stereotype of the ineffectual Celt: "Don't you understand that I'm Irish, he's English. He wants you and he grabs you. I want you and I quarrel with you and have to go on wanting you" (Kiberd 56).

The Irishman was a prisoner of heredity, diet and climate, according to Victorian determinism. Racial and spatial factors also contributed to the creation or rather to the fall of "Paddy the Ape", seen as belonging to a "gross, pig-in-the-kitchen" race (Watson 17). The historian J. A. Froude, a disciple of Carlyle, wrote, in 1841: "the inhabitants, except where they had been taken in hand and metamorphosed into police, seemed more like tribes of squalid apes than human beings" (Watson 17). And the novelist and historian, Charles Kinsley, stated in 1860 in a letter from Ireland to his wife: "I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don't believe they are our fault …" (Watson 17).

The English cartoonists, under the influence of Darwinism and Victorian determinism, drew on Irish stereotypes. The result was either "The Irish Monkey", such as in Sir John Tenniel's cartoons displaying gorilla-like Irish peasants, or the sinister images of the simianized Fenian agitator. Could Fenianism justify such portrayals? "Just as Darwinism appeared to lay bare the ugly realities of the struggle for survival, so Fenianism appeared to reveal the elemental beast in the Irish character" (Kiberd 504-509). Nineteenth century British press, through articles and cartoons like those in *Punch*, carried the stereotypes further, legitimising one group's/ nation's superiority *versus* the other's supremacy. Satirical cartoons and articles exploiting Ireland - the so called "Paddywhackery" -acquired wide distribution and could be considered, therefore, one of the roots of contemporary forms of popular culture representing the Irish.

Maternal narratives: Maureen O'Hara

The popular culture representations of the relationships between Irish America and Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s changed after the 1940s. According to Peter Quinn quoted by Rains, "the nineteenth century Paddy had been replaced during the Depression by the gagster-like Jimmy, he in turn was replaced after 1945 by good-natured, hard-working, decent Pat" (152). The role of the Irish American during America's participation in the Second World War is thus emphasized. John Wayne, playing Sean Thornton, in *The Quiet Man* (1952), directed by John Ford, embodies a character influenced by the Irish American war experience, though Thornton's trauma has other roots: the industrial city and professional boxing in Pittsburg. This Irish American played by Wayne leaves the US in search of a recuperative experience in Ireland, this being a recurrent motif of Hollywood productions in the 1940s and 1950s.

Towards the end of the film, Thornton relives the moments when he killed a man in the boxing ring, so what he needs in Ireland is a healing experience. In his guide to the film, Des McHale cites background information on Thornton: "now to Ireland he is returning, a quiet man seeking forgetfulness of all wars of the human spirit" (Rains 153). *The Quiet Man* is the most widely discussed of Ford's "Irish" films as being central to the academic analysis of Ireland on screen.

In his recuperative experience, Thornton is helped by an Irish woman, Mary-Kate Danaher, played by Maureen O'Hara. This post-Second World War heroine is to be found at home, in Ireland, and is perceived as a maternal figure, even before the denouement of marriage. For many critics and film historians, O'Hara's career is inseparable from those of John Ford and John Wayne, her main role appearing to be that of the healing partner in a series of narratives devoted to a damaged masculinity.

> As such she was usually figured as pretty but natural, outgoing but traditional, and passionate but sensible. After the rigours of the war, it appears, the Irish-American hero had earned the reward of nurture from a more profoundly domestic sexual partner than the flapper of previous generations. Maureen O'Hara, in The Quiet Man, is archetypal of this salvation mode of representing Irish women during the post-war period. (Rains 154).

The Quiet Man seems to insist on O'Hara's role as an icon of domesticity as the most powerful characteristic of Irish womanhood in the Irish-American imagination. Because of the death of her mother, Mary Kate in figured as a maternal image right from the opening scenes of the film, due to her role as a housekeeper for her brother. Before her marriage, her abilities as a wife and mother are fully demonstrated. O'Hara's maternal nature as an object of desire for Thornton is further emphasized through the absent presence of the man's mother throughout the narrative. The Irish-American man has found a refuge in a place known to him from his mother's account s of it. By marrying Thornton and taking care of White O'Morn, the cottage where the man was born and which symbolizes his mother, Mary-Kate – the Irish woman - becomes the agent of a process of recuperation for Thornton – the scarred Irish-American man.

According to Rains, the post-war films present Irish heroines whose appeal to their Irish-American suitors is mainly based on a maternal sexuality and the capacity to provide a secure domestic heaven far away from evil (157). It is as if Mary-Kate abandoned her fire to settle down with the quiet man. O'Hara epitomized "de Valera's vision of the happy maiden (with a strong and fiery nature for good measure …) (Rains 179). "For most moviegoers, the name Maureen O'Hara is indelibly associated with sharp images of lush Technicolor swashbuckler starring the fiery, red-headed, Irish-born actress" (in Barton 83). She was popular due to her beauty as well; her red hair – the most typical signifier of Irishness, flashing eyes and colourful costumes obtaining flamboyant effects. When Sean Thornton sees the flame-haired colleen herding her sheep on the field, he exclaims: "Is that real? She couldn't be!" *(The Quiet, Man).*

Nevertheless, this maternal facet of the Irish heroine of the late 1940s and 1950s is doubled by a more active side, visible in the context of the social and economic changes which took place within the American society in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Replacing men in vital civilian services and in positions related directly to war, American women were encouraged and almost forced to enter the previously male world of paid employment.

As far as *The Quiet Man* is concerned, the couple's dispute over Mary-Kate's dowry is discussed by Luke Gibbons in terms of the woman's character as an attempt to "graft onto tradition newly emerging ideas of women's independence in the early 1950s" (in Rains 154). O'Hara's strength of character in the film seems to be concentrated in her mobility as well. At mealtime, she moves around the kitchen, cooking and scolding her brother and the other men, who are all seated at a lower level than hers. She dances around Wayne and in their new house, where she refuses the conventional pose of the Irish woman seated by the hearth. This constant mobility permits her to dominate the camera, and, thus, the narrative. Even when she looks upwards at Thornton or when she slaps him in the face for having dared to kiss her in the cottage, the heroine refuses to be positioned as an object.

Ford has also been praised for the liberated sexual politics depicted in the film, as the two partners meet as adults and equals. Their relationship "anticipated the sixties by eschewing war in favour of love and by showing that liberation must be a goal of both sexes if they wish to live together in true harmony" (Barton 102). The lovers ultimately play a game of mutual dominance and submission. Promoted by Hollywood as an Irish colleen, Maureen O'Hara came from a middle-class, educated family that instilled in her from birth a sense of her own birth and prepared her for a future career on stage. So, she remained, all her life, an outspoken women. In her memoirs, she insists, for example, on her resistance to studio manipulation and exploitation. Or, at some other point, when applying for American citizenship, she refused to be termed British, this leading to the Irish immigrants to being termed as such in the US (in Barton 84).

In the 1980s and 1990s, there seems to be a lack of Irish-American female representations from American narratives. One explanation found by Rains in her study on *The Irish-American in Popular Culture* has been that these decades favoured a different model of femininity, whose major qualities are physical exuberance, eroticism and emotional openness, whereas Irish femininity has traditionally been structured on maternalism, dependability and chastity.

Irish-American Masculinities: Pierce Brosnan

If up to the 1960s, the absence of American media coverage of Irish issues led to an idealization of Irish female and male images in the diaspora, political events in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, known as "the Troubles" began to produce new representations of Irish men and women. Women were either pictured as fierce activists for human rights, such as the leader of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, Bernadette Devlin, the language used being suggestive of a banshee, a feared spirit-woman of Irish mythology, or as female mourners, recalling the nineteenth century representations of Erin grieving for Ireland.

Male representations during the Troubles were centered on aggression and violence. The mainstream media and Hollywood started to display only the negative side of Irish

masculinity. In the 1970s and 1980s, in the context of the events in Northern Ireland, Irish men were readily associated with "terrorism" in the mainstream imagination. Thus, we witness a return to the nineteenth century version of Irish masculinity of the wild, dangerous Paddy, discussed in further details in the first section of the article.

The attitude of Irish America towards Irish men during the Troubles was ambiguous, a mixture of ejection and avoidance. This is illustrated by the 1981 ABC/EMI television mini-series *The Manions of America*, starring Pierce Brosnan. This film follows the emigration from Ireland in 1845 and the rise to prosperity in America of the Manion family, lead by Brosnan's character, Rory Manion. Rory, played by Brosnan, is an Irish nationalist involved in the violent resistance against the British; he is the classic passionate Irishman who never loses an opportunity to declare his love for Ireland. Rory and Deirdre, his sister, fall in love with a sister and brother, Rachel and David Clement, who are the children of an English lord. The famine strikes; Rory accidently kills his own brother and the main characters migrate to America, where they go through various events and mishaps.

Set in nineteenth century Boston, the story of Rory Manion and his Anglo-Irish fiancée, Rachel Clement, depicts the economic prosperity of the family as they acquire respect in the city. Despite the American success, after settling as an upstanding American businessman, and an apparent renunciation his active participation in the nationalist struggle, the Irish-American man is figured as a nationalist who never abandons his dreams of liberation of Ireland. Thus, Rory risks his family and success to go back to Ireland with a shipment of explosives for an uprising home and, when the mission fails, he escapes once more to the US.

As far as the relationship between Rory and Rachel is concerned, this is conceived, in the fashion of later twentieth century Irish-American narratives, as a "cross-class romantic alliance of an Irishman with an Anglo-Irish or English woman, an alliance which is at least partly responsible for their decision to emigrate to the United States." (Rains 170) Rachel is Anglo-Irish and English-raised and the film opens when she and her father arrive in Manion's village to take possession of the "Big House". She does not really understand Irish society and politics but falls in love with the stable boy, Rory Manion, and they decide to emigrate to America. Their marriage in Boston is presented as an Anglo-Irish reconciliation in the New World. At first, the relationship is presented as a passionate one, based on explicit sexual attraction, but switches to a tragic maternal representation, as Rachel miscarries and is warned that another pregnancy would endanger her life.

The last part of the mini-series focuses on Rory's passionate nature, manifested in his sexual life and political activities and seen as excessive and destructive. He has an affair with a much younger woman, the daughter of a friend; consequently, in order to save her marriage, Rachel decides to risk her life by another pregnancy. Rory's return from Ireland after his failed involvement in the nationalist resistance coincides with Rachel's death after she gives birth to his long-expected son, the first Manion of America. The conclusion regarding male representations of Irish America points to a link between maleness, sexual and political passions, Ireland and Irish American diaspora.

Brosnan's own life story is extremely relevant to the topic of this essay. He was born in Ireland; he moved to London in 1964 at the age of eleven to join his mother who had emigrated when he was an infant after having been abandoned by Pierce's father. The boy felt confused and it was the theatre – the Oval House theatre club in Kennigton- that offered

him a means to express himself: "that's where my education truly began as an actor, as an artist – as somebody who had found a voice to express all the pain, all the angst of my childhood, and all the anger towards the community, towards people who had hurt me, shamed me" (in Barton 182). For the media, Rory Manion's trajectory is that of Brosnan himself:

> When Manions of America begins, the year is 1848 and Rory O'Mannion leaves his home and the family he loves in Ireland to make a new life for himself in another land – American, a land where he can find work with dignity and bring that family to join him. That was a long time ago, and things change. Slightly over 100 years later, in the 1950s, Pierce Brosnan's mother left Ireland and the baby son she loved to make a new life for herself in another land, England, where she could study to become a nurse and bring that son to join her […].
>
> And so Pierce Brosnan, who found a new home in England, becomes Rory O'Mannion, who found a new home in America as part of the wave of determined men and women we now see as our honoured forebears. ("Ireland's Greatest Exports")

Brosnan must have been cast in Rory's role due to his looks and his Irishness. His accent (London-Irish), however, has betrayed him as a hyphenated being: born in Ireland, bred in England, moved to the US. His Irishness has always been part of his identity: "I feel I am Irish, born an Irishman, lived an Irish life, celebrated it and endured it from an early age. You have to acknowledge that, you can't reject it, you have to put some kind of perspective on it" (in Barton 185).

Later, from the 1990s onwards, Irish and Irish-American masculinities started being presented as positive examples of "a predominantly white, working-class, masculine heroism" (Rains 176), such as in *The Devil's Own (*1997), starring Harrison Ford and Brad Pitt. The film shows an idealized Irish-American family, whose security and happiness is threatened by IRA violence. Ford plays the Irish-American heroic *pater familias*, rescuing his loved ones from the threat brought into his family by their IRA lodger, played by Pitt. The tension builds between the family and civic values of the Irish-American man and the tribal loyalties of the IRA Irish man, with the former's success over the latter.

Icons of feminity and masculinity; Irish America and Ireland

In conclusion, for much of the late twentieth century, the encounter, in terms of gender representations in popular culture, seems to have been between Irish femininity and Irish-American masculinity. However, if we follow closely a chronological approach, we could distinguish some specific details.

From the 1960s, for example, Irish masculinity was perceived in terms of violence, which started to fade away only in the 1990s. It is just natural that before WWII, when the American policy regarding the Irish was still an assimilationist one, men should have been regarded as threatening. Similarly, after WWII, when the Irish-American men proved their patriotism through the military service, again, it is normal that they were figured as heroic.

The beginning of the Troubles brings back the violent male representations, which were stopped only during the 1990s, with the development of the peace process in Northern Ireland and the stressing of the civic responsibility of the Irish Americans.

Hollywood female figures indicate the major role played by Irish women in the aftermath of WWII, whereas, recently, these representations have become rare since they may no longer serve to illustrate diasporic anxieties and desires. Depictions of femininity in the 1950s and 1960s foreground Irish women as guardians of domestic and maternal heavens for Irish-American men. In the 1970s and 1980s, under the influence of the news media, there is return to a nineteenth century feminine trope, that of mourning mothers, wives and daughters.

A second conclusion to this article points to the tight connection between Ireland and the USA. The traffic of images, directors and actors between Europe and America flourished in the 1930s, many of them relocating for good in the US, where they formed communities in exile. A crucial link between Irish actors and Hollywood was John Ford, the very successful Irish-American director of *The Quiet Man*, who was committed from the early days of the silent cinema to making Irish-themed films, with colleens, priests, troopers as typical Irish-American roles.

Also, there is a certain in-betweenness of the émigré actor, seen in Brosnan's case and expressed by Gabriel Byrne, another acting Irish in Hollywood,

> I think anybody who leaves Ireland and who goes abroad … a strange thing happens to you because in a weird way you never really belong again in the place that you've left and you never really belong in the place that you go to that you live in a kind of limbo world in between. It has tremendous advantages and it has also certain drawbacks. Liam [Neeson] and I often talk about it, could you ever go back to live in Ireland, and there are so many reasons why I would love to come back here but I would miss America an awful lot too.

(Irish American) Emigration and exile seem to have remained two of the most important narratives of the twentieth century and they have found in Hollywood one of their most compelling narrators.

Ovidius University Constanta, Romania

References

Anderson, Benedict (1991): *Imagined Communities (Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism).* Revised edition. London, New York: Verso

Barton, Ruth (2006): *Acting Irish in Hollywood. From Fitzgerald to Farrell.* Dublin: Irish Academic Press

Devil's Own, The, dir. Alan J. Pakula (Columbia Pictures, 1997), United States.

Foster, R. F. (1989): *Modern Ireland (1600-1972).* London: Penguin

Kiberd, Declan (1995): *Inventing Ireland (The Literature of the Modern Nation).* Reading, Berkshire: Vintage, Cox and Wayman

"Ireland's Greatest Exports". *TV Week* (27 September – 3 October). Pierce Brosnan File, AMPAS.
Manions of America, The. (ABC/EMI, 1981), United States.
Quiet, Man, The. dir. John Ford (Republic Studios, 1952), United States.
Rains, Stephanie (2007): *The Irish-American in Popular Culture (1945-2000).* Dublin: Irish Academic Press
Watson, G.J. (1979): *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival.* New York: Barnes and Noble