

# POST-CELTIC TIGER CRISIS GENDERIZED AND THE ESCAPE TO VIRTUAL REALITIES IN NANCY HARRIS'S *NO ROMANCE*<sup>1</sup>

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Contributing to a volume of essays on recent developments in Irish theatre in 2000, Fintan O'Toole argued that "Ireland is not one story anymore, and we cannot expect single theatrical metaphors for it. Instead of one story and many theatrical images of it, we are moving towards a dramatisation of the fragments rather than the whole thing, the whole society" (54). While this contention might have sounded quite radical at that time, it has proven to be useful in the analysis of a number of so-called Celtic Tiger plays written in the period between the mid-1990s and 2008.<sup>2</sup> A few years after O'Toole's remarks about the substantial change in contemporary Irish theatre Carmen Kuhling and Kieran Keohane observed signs of disintegration characterising the Celtic Tiger years from another angle, stating that "Ireland's experience of accelerated modernization had produced a variety of cultural and social collisions between different and often incompatible forms of life, collision between 'traditional' and 'modern', [...] which reflect how difficult it is to make sense of these rapid social transformations" (12). Works for the stage conceived in these circumstances dramatize a range of responses to the tensions and conflicts rooted in the unexpected and over-fast transition as well as the uneasily obtrusive dichotomies in people's personal experiences. In the post-boom years O'Toole's argument about the multiplication of theatrical metaphors to perform the increasingly divergent stories of Ireland still holds true, while more recently emerging phenomena and constraints also claim to be considered in a critical approach to the Irish theatre of the very recent period.

In a survey of young women playwrights' drama, Melissa Sihra opines that "the younger generation of women in theatre now largely self-identify as feminists, due in part to the integration of feminist discourse in education" and, she continues, "[t]here is a sense of self-worth and entitlement in this generation of women which was not inherent in the previous generation" (557). This new attitude underpins innovations which become manifest in women authors' choices of both subject matter and dramaturgy. Among the young female playwrights who "had plays commissioned by the Abbey" Sihra includes Nancy Harris beside Hilary Fannin, Stacey Gregg, Abbie Spallen, and Elaine Murphy (557). The dramatization of fragments O'Toole calls attention to appears in Nancy Harris's *No Romance* (2011) by way of fragmenting the plot itself. The play consists of three distinct parts, which, at least at first sight, share

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1 The first version of this paper was read at the BAIS Conference hosted by St. Mary's University College in Twickenham, September 2015.

2 The term is used by Richards in his essay "'To Me, Here is More Like There': Irish Drama and Criticism."

very little in terms of setting, action and character. Through its discontinuous form, *No Romance* reflects the atomization of Irish society during the post-Celtic Tiger economic recession: the three parts dramatize troubled close relationships involving couples, families and generations, isolated from each other. The form can be seen as having affinities with postdramatic theatre, which, as Hans Thies Lehmann defines it, is distinguished by experimenting with, among other things, the renunciation of a consistent plot (27). A 2005 production of *Fewer Emergencies*, a work of the boldly experimental British playwright Martin Crimp, established a precedent of this kind of open form before Harris. Crimp's dramatic work consists of three separate parts like *No Romance*, with the notable difference that the three pieces each have their titles, but the characters are unnamed and events are only narrated on the stage. In contrast, Harris deploys the traditional method of having the scenes acted out by characters with names and arranges the three units under the overall heading of the title by simply numbering them. Thus Harris blends features of the postmodern discontinuity and fragmentation with the familiar technique of staging characters' action and dialogue.

### **Post-boom Revival of Traditionalist Attitudes to Gender**

Kuhling and Keohane's above-quoted observation about decisive collisions in the Celtic Tiger society applies to the post-boom years as well, perhaps in even more threatening ways due to the after effects of the erosion of values like solidarity in a largely success-oriented, over-mediatised and materialist culture promoting individualism and consumerism. *No Romance* foregrounds newly emerging problems linked to the economic recession, most notably the resurfacing of traditionalist views on gender and relationships in the postmodern and postfeminist world. Also, the play highlights the ways in which this process can undermine and distort close relationships and family ties as well as make the characters feel isolated, hurt or even powerless to various degrees. Discussing products of contemporary Irish popular culture, Claire Bracken suggests that the much debated term post-feminism reveals contradictory problematics of "subjectivity and objectivity, of negotiating the very fine lines between sexualisation and an articulation of sexual identity, of owning desire and being an object of desire" (6). Taking these contradictions into consideration, post-feminism, unbelievably, seems to involve both feminism and its opposite, anti-feminism concurrently. In this paper I am going to discuss the entangled social and moral issues that underpin the ambivalence of Harris's characters and call for the questionable strategies they use to counteract their loss of certainties regarding gender equity and personal agency while they face the unwelcome constraints of the recession following the Celtic Tiger years.

In his PhD dissertation, considerable sections of which explore the damaging effects of the patriarchal economy on gender relations up to our time, Cormac O'Brien addresses *No Romance* in the context of a "neoliberal, postfeminist culture" (177), fo-

ocusing on Harris's concern with gender primarily in the first scene.<sup>3</sup> Yet, gender is a key theme in all three parts of the play, along with family and generational relations, due to their inseparable ties. Diane Negra calls attention to certain new-old phenomena in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, stressing that "men's falling status and positionality in the recession is recuperated by their symbolic mastery of women. This is part of a broad pattern in which recession-beset masculinity is stabilized through invocation of its social inferior" (26). Put in another way, the process and pitfalls of regression entail the re-establishing of concepts and practices of gender which were dominant in Ireland before the 1980s, affecting both men's and women's behaviour. In the unexpectedly difficult circumstances of the recession, *No Romance* depicts that the communication of those who are closest to each other is fraught with misunderstandings and lies because all parties strive to pursue their own agenda. There are two adult male characters on stage in the second and third parts of the play respectively. One is Joe, the unemployed husband of Carmel; another is Michael, a divorced man and weekend father to his twelve-year-old son, Johnny, and son of eighty-year old Peg. Beside them a third, although offstage male character called Simon is also portrayed in the first scene, through the ample and vivid references to him by his fiancée, Laura. All three are middle-aged and their relationships with their female partners or, in Michael's case, his offstage ex-wife and onstage mother, are strained and disharmonious explicitly or covertly, with the men trying to recuperate patriarchal control while the women either humiliate themselves or strike back, even using violence to do so.

The first scene comprises a dialogue between Gail, a lesbian photographer, and Laura, her client. Laura holds a job under the name "hostess" which, according to her husband-to-be, Simon, "is a form of prostitution" (25), and so he wants her to give it up once they are married, a step which had been the norm decades before in the post-independence Irish society. Laura is eager to please him and has come to Gail to be photographed in fantastic dresses so as to have her body eternalized in some admirable and erotic pose before she receives radical therapy for breast cancer, which is likely to ravage her figure. The sexy photos are meant to serve as a unique present for Simon on his fortieth birthday. As O'Brien sums up her situation, Laura "willingly objectifies herself and embraces the patriarchal gaze economy of both her fiancé and society" as well as internalizes "post-feminist body politics" (178). Often quoting Simon, Laura seems to be so dominated by him and his patriarchal views that she wears a corset, having succumbed to Simon's wish to control and shape her body for his satisfaction: "Simon bought me this corset. Picked out himself and everything, bless him. [...] he loves the whole chorus-girl can-can thing" (21). To save him from any disturbance, she is determined not to share her grave health problem with Simon and plans to leave him after giving him the photos so that he remembers her body in its pre-treatment beauty and perfection. For his sake she renounces her

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3 I quote from this dissertation with the kind permission of its author, Cormac O'Brien.

sense of self and dignity which would demand her to be honest in their relationship, and readily defends him even at the cost of contradicting herself: “Simon’s a good man. He really is. If I tell him, he’ll be fantastic” (39-40). Moreover, she regards her own insincere behaviour as natural and conforming to the general norm: “it’s amazing the things you can *not* say to someone – when they’re in the bed beside you. It’s amazing the things you can keep to yourself” (31).

Gail, the other character in scene one is also damaged by the legacy of the strict moral system of the past reappearing in a new though not always recognizable guise. Her ten-year-long lesbian relationship with her lover Sarah has just broken up, but she is not able to move out of their so far shared home for financial reasons and has to witness the presence of Sarah’s new girl-friend in the apartment. O’Brien observes that the author assigns “typical male/female roles” to the lesbian couple, which emulates “heteronormative relationality” (177). In accordance, Gail is cast in a female artist’s role whereas Sarah, her ex-lover, is a doctor, pursuing a ‘man’s’ career and it is she who pays for the mortgage on the posh apartment. At the time of the play’s action, Ireland had not yet introduced same-sex marriage as a personal option, and consequently abandoned partners like Gail could remain without any kind of legal arrangement to help them start a new life. In the post-boom circumstances Gail remains dependent on her former partner, subjected to the inferior position of being tolerated and practically trapped in Sarah’s “upmarket apartment in Dublin’s city centre” (5), which must have been built during the Celtic Tiger boom. Distressed and seeing no way out, Gail complains to her client about her hopeless situation: “my old studio was in town but – the rents” (12).

Joe, the husband in the second scene is unemployed, while Carmel, his wife, holds a good job and has become the bread-winner for the family. Their case illustrates the commonsensical and widespread notion that the scarcity of jobs during the post-boom years is gendered, leaving men “particularly and singularly impacted by the global recession” (Negra 24), which can alienate partners and destroy marriages. Clearly, the experience of living in unwelcome passivity and dependence on his wife has a damaging effect both on Joe’s masculinity and his ethical self, urging him to set the gender balance ‘right’ at whatever cost. His male identity significantly confused, Joe tries to compensate for his weakened and feminized state by acting the authoritative judge of women who cannot speak back since they are absent. He recalls his dead mother as “an old dragon” (69) and expresses a profound shock at the news that their daughter, Emer, has uploaded pictures of herself naked under a wet T-shirt on the internet for a competition which anyone can see. In contempt, he calls her “an internet trollop” (45), forgetting that he himself is an addicted internet user who often searches for pornographic material on it.

To borrow Edward Albee’s satirically charged subtitle in *Who Is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the vicious “fun and games” Harris’s couple play begin when Carmel divulges her recent discovery that Joe has received a pair of stockings and a dirty letter

by post from someone called Abbi, who had offered her already worn intimate items for sale online, and Joe had ordered this item from her. First Joe denies the whole thing, then admits that it really happened but that it was only a joke and accuses his wife of violating his privacy when she opened his emails and the parcel addressed to him. Infuriated, Carmel regards Joe as a hypocrite and suddenly “kicks him in the shin” (62), unable to consider that the roots of his behaviour might reach deeper than lying for the sake of convenience. Not having a job, Joe is a man without socio-economic status and agency, therefore he feels his manhood threatened and attempts to reclaim it by regressing to old patriarchal attitudes. To understand his identity crisis Negra’s argument is helpful again:

[i]n Ireland’s rapid conversion from capitalist utopia to dystopia, a gendered logic of ascription/explanation for developments, the speed and scale of which nearly everyone finds overwhelming and disorienting, promises (sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly) stabilization through the restitution of essentialized gender dichotomies. (31)

Among the tropes depicting these dichotomies one finds, Negra goes on arguing, that “the beset, recession-impacted man, whose anxieties are done away with via his transformation into the re-masculinized man” (31). Joe’s attempts to re-masculinize himself apparently fail and the ways in which Harris shapes the couple’s relationship bring further twists into the dramatic representation of the new-old gender conflicts.

Uncertain of his identity as a man but not a breadwinner, Joe behaves in strangely contradictory ways. Once he falls on his knees like a medieval knight in front of his wife whom he betrayed by his involvement in the porno story on the internet, acting out a traditional example of manhood. Then he is eager to take revenge on Carmel for humiliating him by what resembles the stereotypically feminine act of gossiping. Hiding behind memories of his mother as a strong individual who “was funny about most women” (70), he blurts out that she had made a remark about the fatness of Carmel’s legs after she “got the job in the bank” (71). True or not (probably not), if he intended to humiliate Carmel in his turn, this story only works to fuel Carmel; she strikes back as an emancipated, self-aware woman who emphasizes her independence by telling Joe about her sexual adventure with a Nigerian taxi driver. Similar to Laura’s silence about her fatal disease so as not to disturb her fiancé, Michael resorts to conventional beliefs about partnership according to which openness and sincerity should necessarily be limited between men and women to avoid crossing certain fixed boundaries: “What happened to privacy? What happened to discretion? What happened to keeping it to yourself? Maybe there are some things we are better off not knowing. Maybe we can love each other despite” (75). Unlike in the tentatively optimistic closure of Albee’s play about deep-running marital conflicts, there seems to be not the slightest chance for the couple’s at least partial reconciliation in *No Romance*.

### Family Feuds and Domestic Violence

In the third part of the drama Michael has just bought a wheel-chair for his eighty-year-old mother Peg, although she does not need one yet. The reason for buying it was that he is determined to move her out of the country cottage where she lives (and where the scene is set) and place Peg in an old people's home in Dublin. Michael worries about the problems the economic recession is causing him, therefore it is more than likely that he is intent on moving her so that he can sell the house. Relations in his own family are stressful and could not be worse, summed up in his biased harangue: "he [Michael's son, Johnny] got his head stuck in fucking computer games twenty-four-seven and his mother's a nutcase. It's her that's the problem. Her" (86). Ireland made legal divorce possible only after the referendum of 1995, and not much has happened since then to help divorced couples, in terms of marriage counselling, maintain a normal relationship with each other for the sake of their children. A weekend father struggling with economic problems, Michael sees himself a victim deprived of authority and agency: "She [his ex-wife] wants him [Johnny] home tonight [...] despite the fact it's my weekend with him [...] I'm done arguing with her. Like all women she always gets what she wants in the end" (89). Comparably with Joe in part two, he also chooses the kind of compensation of exercising dominance over weaker people like his elderly mother and his teenage son. His re-assertion of patriarchal rules involves the infantilization of Johnny whom he orders about, for instance telling him to avert his eyes when they catch sight of hippies taking off their clothes in the vicinity of the house.

Like Beckett's old and lonely women, Winnie of *Happy Days* in particular, Peg likes to speak a lot about her personal history. What inspires her to conjure up memories this time is the prospect of losing her house as Michael is so obviously intent on moving her out of the cottage and putting her into a state-run institution. Obsessed with his own problems he fails to understand that this country house, which she bought for herself after her husband's death, symbolizes freedom for his mother. Peg says: "I can sing in this cottage at the top of my voice. [...] And there is no one here to say I can't. When I saw this cottage I knew it was a place I could be myself" (102). Through memories of Peg's ruined married life the author introduces the subject of the inequity of genders and the potential occurrence of domestic violence along with it, which were quite prevalent in the postcolonial decades and are still haunting Irish society. As a crucial example of her psychological and also physical wounds, Peg dwells on how once her husband belted her "straight in the face with his fist" (97) when she was making well-rehearsed preparations to take off her stockings in front of him in a sexy way. In Jesse Weaver's wording Peg's husband "battled with his own buried sexuality" through a lifetime because his real love was his best friend, but he had to repress his homosexual inclinations to avoid contempt and marginalization in the ultra-conservative and prudish Irish society. Consequently, his wife and children suffered from the aggression he vented on them so much so that as Peg now confesses

she would have liked to gather her three children and find peace “far away from him” (104). Strangely, the past now revisits her in the form of being mistreated by her son.

Calling Beckett’s Winnie to mind again, Peg takes out “*a small compact mirror*” (98) from her bag and reminisces about men’s views on female beauty that she became aware of in her youth, implying the power of the male gaze which had traditionally been the catalyst for women’s efforts to look attractive. What Peg went through in her younger years as a woman subordinate to her husband and a plaything for his selfish best friend sounds like a cautionary tale in the context of the recession crisis characterised by “intense economic austerity as an overriding imperative that nullifies the interests of gender equity” (Negra 24), which might easily generate the reappearance of old patterns and attitudes. As oppressed subjects to colonial or patriarchal rule did in the past, Peg protests and rebels against the threat of being deprived of freedom and carried to a place where she does not want to go. Reminiscent of Carmel in the second part, she turns to violence as a means to defeat the revival of male control if words fail; she thrashes her son with the sweeping-brush, a symbol of domestic duties assigned to women, children and other inferiors in the patriarchal system.

Peg’s case shows that growing materialism and the concomitant cultural fragmentation within the post-boom society are likely to alienate not only couples but also generations from each other. Early twenty-first-century Ireland, where “the past, repressed, returns and intrudes into the present, informing the future” (Kuhling and Keohane 120), is haunted by an earlier stage in the nation’s life, the decades when it was still influenced by the socially divisive rigidities inherited from colonialism. The other victim of a failed relationship in the third scene of the play is Johnny, the twelve-year-old boy who is wedged between his divorced and antagonistic parents, an overanxious but also manipulative mother and a father whose multiple frustrations find an outlet in self-pity and verbal aggression. In a sense, his grandmother does not spare Johnny either; ignored by her son but compelled to speak to someone, she tells her stories to the boy as her reluctant audience, moreover, she asks him to help her put make-up on her face. Disconcerted even further, the teenage child appears to turn apathetic, uncommonly speechless and insensitive, at least in the eyes of adult family members: Peg’s remark that the boy is without a “sense of family” (93) sounds deeply ironical, albeit unintentionally so. Johnny’s monosyllabic kind of communication is probably just his defensive strategy in a contradictory and hostile world.

### **Ethical Issues, Humour and the Grotesque**

In his introduction to the first volume of the series *Irish Studies in Europe*, Werner Huber<sup>4</sup> claims that in recent Irish literature “the signs of an ‘ethical turn’ begin to appear. Questions are being asked [...] concerning ‘responsibilities’ and the problem of

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4 The book series *Irish Studies in Europe* was founded by the late Werner Huber, esteemed colleague and friend whose expertise, personal kindness and helpfulness we miss very much.

being in accordance with moral/ethical standard of any kind” (9). The process is all the more conspicuous in Irish culture close to the end of the first decade of the 2000s because “the enthusiasm that naturally goes with such progress [experienced during the Celtic Tiger] has evaporated and been replaced by sobriety” Huber continues (9). In the postmodern and postfeminist Irish theatre that Harris’s play belongs to it is the reader/spectator who is inspired to raise questions about certain negative phenomena that the authors represent in public morality, individuals’ ethical stance and responsibility or the lack of it for their acts. Relevantly, Nicholas Ridout discusses the idea of “the re-activation of the spectator” which he calls “one of the key concepts of ethical thought about theatre and performance” in his book *Theatre and Ethics* (59). He also adds that “[e]thics does not quite displace either aesthetics or politics. Aesthetic experience becomes the condition of possibility for a particular kind of ethical relationship” (66). *No Romance* deploys a special kind of humour as the most effective dramaturgical means of its aesthetics.

Meidhbh McHugh in an essay explores the presence and working of humour in the most recent plays by female authors that premiered in the Abbey between 2010 and 2014, including *No Romance*. Her chief goal is to highlight that these works, conceived in the last few years which she defines as the “fifth tide of feminism” (144), have one thing definitely in common: they all present funny details. As McHugh argues, by means of comedy the young women authors’ plays expose shortcomings and failures within the society and make these the butt of the joke: “The inanity of sexism and misogyny; the absurdity of gender inequality, and the oppressive effect of patriarchy on both women *and* men, is now a cause for laughter, and by looking and laughing we might shake the foundations on which its culture stands” (145-146). Staging the absurdities of the patriarchal order and its militarized version through ludicrously impossible issues and incidents women have to cope with is, of course, not new, either North or South of the Irish border. In the 1980s, the women’s theatre company Charabanc provoked its audiences to laughter at the horrific effects of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, suffice it to mention *Somewhere over the Balcony* (1987), a work of Marie Jones and the company. This play offers a farcical picture of the chaos of existence everybody experienced in the region during the conflict-ridden years before ceasefire. One example from the South might be Paula Meehan’s *Mrs Sweeney* (1997), a dramatic transposition of the medieval myth of the mad Sweeney to a contemporary working-class milieu in Dublin, which stages women’s desire for liberation through comic and carnivalesque parts of its action.

About *No Romance* McHugh says that “particularly in the second and the third parts of the triptych structure, much of the comedy comes from incongruous elements” (152). The critic’s most telling examples are the following: “Incongruity happens in witty, one-line absurdities or it is situational such as the extraordinary inappropriateness of Carmel holding up a pair of women’s stockings which Joe has ordered online, from a girl called Abbi (with a ‘heart over the i’) in what should be his last moments alone with his mother’s corpse” (152). Indeed, humour and the laughter provoked by



a range of incongruities is a distinctive feature of the play. However, the quality of the comic effects achieved by the play can be further specified. In his recent book which explores the strategic use of the grotesque in contemporary Anglophone drama Ondřej Pilný writes: "I tend to agree with Ralph Remshardt – the author of the only existing study in English dedicated to the grotesque in theatre – in that laughing at the grotesque is always inappropriate in a sense: laughter counteracts the horror generated by the grotesque but it is simultaneously a reaction that is chillingly aware of its own 'callousness'" (7). Through incongruities, Pilný continues, the absurd remains influential, shaping the "ethics, politics, social justice" of recent plays, and so it is possible to analyse "the use of the grotesque as a device of social and political critique" (13). In *No Romance* a vividly conspicuous incongruity that nurtures grotesque effects is the wide gap between the characters' regression to conservative views, practices and patterns of behaviour in gender and generational relations, while they are obsessed with the virtual world of postmodern cyberspace culture as their individual strategy to cope with hardships and failures.

### Escape to Virtual Realities and Its Risks

In scene one Laura, shortly before her treatment for cancer, embodies the traditionally self-effacing role of the devoted partner and comes up with extravagant ideas about the best poses for photos which could display her beauty and impress her future husband. In fact, her wild ideas are inspired by an online sex blog written by a woman who calls herself "C", who uploads erotic stories after going through a routine: "she puts on some music, pours herself a drink, closes her eyes and calls in her muses" (22). Gail, the other character of the scene, reacts to the presence of her ex-partner's new girlfriend in a conventional way, embracing the role of the cheated and jealous woman: "I can't stand the thought of their love-making. Do you think it means more to her than ours did?" (37). Being powerless, she resorts to the act of taking revenge by the most up-to-date method: she "defriends" Sarah on Facebook (36). Both Laura and Gail try to overcome their helplessness and repossess some agency by replicating normative standards of behaviour or using defensive strategies characteristic of unequal relations under patriarchy. Incongruously, however, they turn to the latest technological means of cyberspace culture, while their aim is not to have fun so much as to gain some better hold on their own life.

Joe in scene two is impatient with their daughter's self-advertising on the internet, yet he himself is addicted to its challenges and has joined the admirers of "this one woman who writes kinky versions of myths and things. She has a whole fan club and her use of language and her imagery, [...] she's probably a university professor over there in New York or somewhere" (66). The liberating advantage of online communication is that the users can remain anonymous, at least to a large extent, and, as Máirtín Mac an Ghaill and Chris Haywood claim, "individuals because of their relatively anonymous communicative practices suspend their conventional norms and

values" (134). Doing so, they manage to disconnect themselves from the burden of their bruised past or confused identities in the present. The internet, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood continue, "provides the possibilities of women being men who are playing women and the alternative position of men being women who play at being men" (137). Thus online communication is an ideal resource and pastime for Joe, who, jobless, needs a boost of his masculine identity. Claire Lynch writes that "the internet is ultimately a destination for the imagination" (29), which explains why Joe, disappointed with everyday reality that questions and restricts his authority, chooses to enter into relationships online. Carmel's discovery that Joe receives sexy emails and has bought a pair of used female stockings described by its anonymous sender as "little naughties" (59) that Joe can have fun with, as well as Joe's comically contradictory self-defence, are incongruous with the setting, a funeral parlour where his mother's corpse is laid out. The grotesque effects produced in the scene are at their peak when, infuriated by Joe's clandestine sexually tinged activities on the internet while he preaches the need for compromises in marriage, Carmel "*stuffs the stockings inside the corpse's jacket*" (76). A chillingly profane act, it is carried out just before the mourning relatives' arrival at the funeral parlour so there is no chance for Joe to fish the stockings out and dispose of them somehow.

O'Brien observes that the "secret identity of the author of a pornographic blog [where Laura takes peculiar ideas from] and online vendor of erotic paraphernalia [bought by Joe] is revealed to be Peg, a wheelchair-bound octogenarian," joining the three parts of the play together (177). Like Laura in Part One, who struggles to keep her fiancé's love, or Joe in Part Two, who tries to re-secure his masculinity, or her own grandson, who plays digital games endlessly, old Peg uses the internet in search of a new self and exciting experiences that mask the reality of old age and her disturbing memories. In Caomhan Keane's interview with the playwright Harris suggests that through her sexy blog-writing game Peg aims "to recapture the youth she wasted on an abusive, closeted husband." The imaginary position she takes in the blog is that of a younger woman who allures men (or women playing men) to enter into "cyber-sex" with her, which serves as compensation for having suffered so much in a loveless marriage. Emer O'Kelly writes in her theatre review that by devising her fictional blog "old Peg has her own methodology for surviving lonely decrepitude." At the end of the play, after she has managed to persuade Michael and Johnny to leave her alone for some time, Peg pours herself a drink, takes out a pair of silk stockings from a bag, and puts them on. Then she releases a computer from a leather case, and begins to type. It all looks like the scene described by Laura earlier, who got to know Peg in the virtual world through her blog of wild stories under the name "C," which may mean many things including "cunt" (22) true to the erotica in the stories. The subtle interaction of the playful and the horrific provides the source of the grotesque here.

*No Romance* is not the first contemporary play which articulates the intrusion of digital culture into the world of the theatre. In 1997, Patrick Marber's *Closer* became a hit with a hilarious chatting scene between two male characters, one of whom pretends

to be a woman. Besides being funny, their talk leads to misunderstandings in the relationships they are involved in. Another example is Enda Walsh's *Chatroom* (2005), which raises the issue of bullying in cyber-space and its potentially tragic outcome. The persistent use of the internet in *No Romance* is a strategy to highlight that the recession following the Celtic Tiger boom years and its effects in terms of the isolation of individuals and the confusion of values have left many people lonely and desperate. In Keane's interview with her Harris says: "we live in a society where communication has become so much easier yet at another level so much more complicated because we can create mythologies about ourselves online. We can be invisible and hide behind things a lot more. That adds to the complexity of our one on one communication." The stories of different characters in *No Romance* connect with each other only in the terrain of a virtual reality and have no promising closure. Most of the characters immerse themselves in internet culture and are tempted to assume alternative identities, and hope to regain agency over their actions and choices. However, the strong addiction to newness easily leads to the denial of contemporary reality, Lynch cautions (27), as well as to shirking responsibility to other people in the Levinasian sense, which can be detrimental to both social and cultural values.

## Conclusion

As Weaver cogently summarizes, "Harris does on the whole deliver an effectually fractured portrait of an Ireland undergoing a collective loss of its sense of self, delicately structured with interwoven references that tie all three disparate acts together." *No Romance*, therefore, reveals that entering virtual realities to compensate oneself for multiple disappointments might seem to work for a time but is likely to further alienate characters from each other and also from themselves in the real world. In these conditions, the play attests, even the closest relationships of married couples, partners and family members have no romance in them; rather, the opposite is the case. The grotesque mode developing from the dramatic situations set in the troubled cultural environment of economic recession and its gendered consequences provides the means with which the play highlights the pitfalls of addiction to virtual realities. In addition, its critical function is to lay bare the potential harmfulness of the lurking signs of fragmentation, lack of solidarity and regressive tendencies that affect morality and communication in the post-boom society. By theatrical means, Harris forces her audience to raise the question: is this the path Irish people should follow now?

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