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**“In mortal form or in ghostly form”:  
Unraveling the Significance of the Bog in  
Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats***

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## "في صورة آدمية أو في صورة ملائكية": المستنقع وطننا واستقرارنا في مسرحية بجوار مستنقع القطط لمارينا كار

**مستخلص:** يمثل المستنقع -الذي يقع في أراضي أيرلندا- مستودعًا للذكريات الجماعية، وفي سعي الدارسين لاستكشاف أهميته نراهم قد قدموا لنا وجهات نظر ثاقبة، إذ رأوا أنه مستودع هائل للذكريات المرتبطة بالثقافة الأيرلندية ورمزًا لفرص التحول والانتقال. يحلل هذا البحث مسرحية مارينا كار بجوار مستنقع القطط 1998م، من خلال الغوص عميقًا في مكان هذه المسرحية وزمانها سعيًا من الباحث وراء كشف النقاب عن العلاقة الوثيقة بين المكان وبين من يعدونه مسكنًا لهم. كما أن البحث يستقري مقاربات بديلة للمستنقع باعتباره عالمًا أنثويًا، يتفق مع وجهات النظر التي تربط بين الجندرية وأرض أيرلندا وتنسجم معه. وتتبدى لنا مسرحية بجوار مستنقع القطط وكأنها لوحة تثير المشاعر والأحاسيس تعكس الإيقاع الخالد لبقعة من الأرض غارقة في الغموض والرمزية، فنجد العالم الملموس وعالم الأرواح يمتزجان مع المستنقع ليشكل ثلاثتهم مصائر شخصيات المسرحية من مهدها إلى لحدها. ويجد القارئ أن المستنقع يرمز إلى الاحتجاج والمعارضة، فهو ملجأ لمن يبحث عن التحرر وفرصة مواتية لهن. إنه ينبوع للرضا الروحي امتزج برحيق النكل والشوق والحنين، وهو يجسد القدرة على تحمل شدائد هذه الحياة والصبر على أقدارها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** مارينا كار، بجوار مستنقع القطط، المستنقع، الرضا الروحي، المقاومة

**Abstract:** Situated upon the Irish landscape, the bog stands as a repository of collective memories and harbors historical fragments awaiting resurgence in unforeseen forms. In exploring the Irish bog's significance, scholars offer insightful perspectives, envisioning it as a profound repository of cultural memories and as a symbol of transitional spaces. This paper dissects Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), by delving into its setting to unveil the enduring link between the landscape and the inhabitants who identify it as their abode. It also explores alternative interpretations of the bog as a feminine realm, aligning with conventional perspectives that associate gender with the Irish soil. Carr's narrative unfolds as a poignant tapestry that echoes the timeless cadence of a landscape steeped in mystery and symbolism. Physical and metaphysical realms intertwine with the bog, shaping destinies from birth to demise. In *Bog of Cats*, the bog symbolizes opposition, serving as a refuge and an opportunity for women seeking liberation. A wellspring of spiritual contentment, woven with threads of bereavement and yearning, the bog epitomizes resilience and endurance in life's challenges.

**Keywords:** Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats*, bog, spiritual contentment, resistance

## **Bogs in Irish History and Literature: A Brief Survey**

The term bog is defined as "muddy terrain" in Ireland and it originates from the Irish word *bogach* (Foss and O'Connell 184). Bogs persist as both a source of fuel and a cultural panorama. They endure, etched in Irish lore, as both a physical and anthropological chronicle more prominently than in any other European nation (Feehan 168). Echoing Aldo Leopold, a bog possesses a commanding presence of its own, almost akin to a metaphor for the subconscious (145). Dianne Meredith reflects on this,

A rich body of geographical lore, much of it related to real or imaginary hazards, characterizes perceptions of bog landscapes. Bog bursts, will-o'-the-wisps, carnivorous plants, weird creatures, and perceptions of the bottomless bog all play a part in the folklore of the landscape ("Hazards in the Bog" 319).

Bogs are a unique natural occurrence that has captivated not only scholars and historians but also wordsmiths and artists. According to Gladwin, bogs "sprawl across Ireland and are often associated with history and culture as much as they are with geography and biology" (17). Jennifer Parrot elucidates that bogs occupy a liminal space, outwardly appearing desolate yet harboring a rich, preserved history, poised to disrupt the current narrative (6). Additionally, Sydney Feldhake observes that "the bog has thematically and historically functioned as a hallowed, dreaded, yet sacred limit between life and death, gestation and birth, the deep past and the present as well as the future" (2).

Similar to moorlands, the bog stands out as a defining feature of the Irish terrain, frequently depicted in Irish literary works, whether fictional or non-fictional. Consequently, the bog assumes the role of a cultural motif imbued with diverse connotations and symbols, depending on the artist's intentions and the historical context of the text's creation (Galíné 78). Irish literature commonly incorporates Irish boglands into its settings, yet certain narratives delve deeper into their significance, attributing symbolic meanings and connections to them. For instance, in Edmund Spenser's portrayal of Ireland in his work *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596), Ireland is shown as a land of ancient and antiquated qualities, while Bram Stoker's *The*

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*Snake's Pass* from 1890 scrutinizes the imprint of British imperialism on the Irish bog territories (Gerrard 22).

Roy Foster underscores the anxiety felt by British soldiers toward the Irish wastelands, where thick woodlands, bogs, lakes, and mountains served as a place of refuge for resistance movements, evoking contempt from Elizabethan soldiers for the territory (6). This association of bogs with wild nature and crudeness is further reflected in Protestant gothic literature and the specific texts under examination. Acting as silent witnesses for centuries, bogs have observed traditional and ancestral clashes, sacrificial rites, and human transgressions, symbolizing the perpetuity of violence and atrocities. Terry Eagleton, in *The Truth about the Irish*, posits that, "if bogs have haunted the Irish imagination, it may be partly because they reveal the past as still present" (31).

Situated amidst a perilous landscape, bogs, characterized by acidic soil and the remnants of decomposing vegetation, are scarce in Ireland but primarily situated West and North of Ireland. Over time, they have acquired a supernatural allure, becoming favored settings for Irish narratives. Gladwin notes that bogs have existed peripherally within Irish society, harboring marginalized communities, narratives, spirits, and histories (387). Feldhake contends that contemporary recognition of Irish bogs as eco-friendly valuable marshes is juxtaposed with the threat posed by industrial sod harvesting. Should these bog lands vanish, free enterprise would be the eerie force of disintegration. Nonetheless, the image of the bog in Irish culture and literature is poised to endure, as the larger enigmatic natural forces personified by bogs continue to subtly disrupt the familiar landscapes we traverse. In one of her interviews, Carr remembers the place where "grew up on a beautiful lake called Pallas Lake, and I remember in the summer all the beautiful lanes and the bogs, all of that" (Leavey 13)

Carr shares that her upbringing in County Offaly, situated in the Irish Midlands, shaped her perspective on the significance of landscape. She recounts attending school in Gortnamona, translating to "field of the bog", emphasizing the integral role of these marshlands in Irish studies and ecological discourse. Carr emphasizes that bogs have perpetually resided on the fringes of Irish society, serving as havens for marginalized communities, narratives, spiritual entities, and historical narratives. The bog landscape

holds a central position in the narrative, particularly given Carr's upbringing in County Offaly. Despite witnessing a significant decline in boglands, County Offaly still retains remnants of Monagan Bog, Boora Bog, and segments of the Bog of Allen, among the largest remaining raised bogs in Ireland. Carr's exploration of the dialogue between the living and the deceased implies an ongoing continuum rather than a definitive conclusion. In Carr's conception, transitioning from earthly existence to a spectral state parallels moving from one realm to another, with the bog acting as a nexus where both worlds converge, akin to a metaphorical link.

### **Marina Carr and the Representation of the Bog in *Bog of Cats***

Born in 1964 in County Offaly within the heart of Ireland's central region, Carr's origin profoundly shapes her artistic endeavors. During an interview with Patricia Novillo-Corvalan, she acknowledged the significant impact of how she was brought up amidst County Offaly's rural landscapes on her creative output. Carr pursued her education at University College Dublin before embarking on a career as a Writer in Residence at the Abbey Theatre and later assuming the role of Assistant Professor in Drama Studies at Trinity College. Her theatrical works have garnered international acclaim, receiving commissions from esteemed institutions such as the England's National Theatre. Carr's remarkable contributions to literature have earned her numerous accolades, including the Susan Smith Blackburn Award in 1997 for her play *Portia Coughlan*, the Irish Times/ESB Award for Best New Play in 1998 for *Bog of Cats*, and a Hennessey Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

*Bog of Cats* recounts the tumultuous life of Hester Swane, a forty-year-old woman of gypsy-Irish descent. Neglected by her mother in the bog at the tender age of seven, Hester later faces betrayal from her husband, Carthage Kilbride, who leaves her to marry the daughter of a notable local farmer, Xavier Cassidy. Determined to cling to the land of her birth and fulfill her promise to her mother, Hester defiantly refuses Carthage's demands to vacate the Bog of Cats, where she resides with her daughter, Josie, in a caravan bearing her mother's name. Despite Carthage's insistence that he can provide a better life for their daughter elsewhere, Hester remains steadfast in her allegiance to the bog, rooted in her belief in ancestral ties and the mystical allure of the landscape. Fuelled by a sense of betrayal and her deep connection to the bog, Hester takes drastic measures to enact revenge.

Embracing the eerie atmosphere of the bog, steeped in decay and folklore, she orchestrates a series of vengeful acts, culminating in the tragic demise of both herself and her daughter, Josie.

In *Bog of Cats*, Carr "was captured by the Irish landscape ... to create a connection between the past and modern Ireland"(Abd El-Rahma 82). In the play, Carr illuminates the bog as more than a mere geographical entity; rather, it embodies a nexus where landscape, history, and identity converge, serving as a backdrop for profound character interconnections. Throughout the narrative, the bog not only sustains the characters' lives but also becomes their chosen final resting place. Hester, in particular, finds serious significance in this desolate yet eerily captivating terrain. For her, the bog transcends its physicality, representing a visceral sense of belonging. It stands as the sole tether to her maternal lineage, evoking a haunting amalgamation of loss and yearning. Cerquoni underscores the bog's transformative role in Hester's psyche, delineating it as a liminal space where her innermost layers are laid bare (183). As the place where her mother left her, the bog symbolizes both abandonment and solace, encapsulating individuals relegated to spectral existences. Moreover, it blurs conventional boundaries, intertwining realms of the living and the dead, fostering an uncanny sense of interconnectedness.

Echoing the bog's significance, Gaston Bachelard's notion of dwelling elucidates the weighty impact of place on one's sense of self (166). Hester's attachment to the bog epitomizes this, as it serves as the epicenter of her world, imbuing her life with purpose and meaning. Her dialogue with the Ghost Fancier underscores her struggle for belonging, highlighting the dissonance between physical shelter and emotional resonance. Indeed, the bog emerges not only as a physical locale but as a psychological anchor, where Hester confronts her past, navigates her present, and envisions her future.

Cerquoni emphasizes the importance of Hester's connection to vast terrains like the swan's lair, and the bog, portraying it as a profound reinterpretation of the concept of home (37). Through these spaces, Hester finds a sense of belonging and identity that transcends conventional notions of domicile. She provides insight into her attachment to these environments by recounting her mother's departure, quoting her mother's words: "And she

says, ‘I’m goin’ walkin’ the bog, you are to stay here Hetty.’ And I says, ‘No, I’d go along with her, and made to folly her. And she says, ‘No, Hetty, you wait here, I’ll be back in a while.’ . . . And I watched her walk away from me across the Bog of Cats. And across the Bog of Cats I’ll watch her return” (*Bog of Cats* 289). This poignant recollection encapsulates the depth of Hester's connection to the bog and other landscapes, which serve not only as physical spaces but as repositories of memory and identity. Through her interaction with these environments, Hester constructs a multifaceted sense of home that resonates with her on a profound emotional level.

The bog, a central motif in the narrative, serves as a symbol of Hester's intricate personal history, acting as a repository for her memories. In its ever-shifting nature, Hester finds her memories constantly teasing her, hinting at the depth of her connection to the landscape. It is not just a physical space; it embodies her identity, heritage, and the haunting remnants of her past traumas, which linger beneath the surface despite her attempts to bury them under new experiences. Moreover, the bog stands as a testament to Hester's resilience, symbolizing her defiance against societal norms and expectations, particularly concerning gender roles. At the outset, the bog exudes an aura of mystique and otherworldliness, as explored by Meredith in her analysis of its representation in Irish cultural lore.

With its seemingly boundless depths and mysterious inhabitants like "mankeepers" and "bogeys," bogs have long been the stuff of legend in Irish folklore, captivating imaginations and inspiring tales of the supernatural. Similarly, within the play's narrative, the bog emerges as a ghostly realm, shrouded in an eerie atmosphere reminiscent of a "bleak white landscape of ice and snow" (*Bog of Cats* 258). The arrival of the Ghost Fancier, his mistaken assumptions about Hester's fate, and the spectral appearance of Hester's deceased brother, Joseph, all contribute to the uncanny ambience. Additionally, characters like Catwoman, with her enigmatic persona and abilities, blur the boundaries between the natural and supernatural realms, adding to the bog's mystique. Sihra's portrayal of Catwoman as a figure residing on the edge of reality, possessing both human and animalistic qualities, further enhances the bog's allure. In this narrative context, the presence of deadly creatures and mysterious figures within the bog aligns seamlessly with the eerie imagery associated with bogs in Irish folklore.

The bog, in its essence, emerges as a potent symbol of Hester's defiance against the colonialist and capitalist ideologies upheld by the other characters. McDowell delves into the exploitation women faced within capitalist frameworks, shedding light on the nuanced power dynamics at play (81). Carr masterfully underscores this dichotomy between Hester's fluidity and the entrenched colonialism of her peers, depicting her as a wanderer who transcends societal confines, a stark contrast to the static existence of the other characters. It means that Land ownership symbolized a sense of belonging and economic progress in early Irish nationhood, linking citizenship with control over feminized land. This problematic dynamic is deepened by Carr's critique of the dominant role of land ownership in the Irish collective consciousness, highlighting the violent means by which ownership is established (Ryan 4).

The colonialist inclinations of the characters not deemed as "other" are glaringly evident in the actions of Xavier Cassidy and Carthage. The outset of *Bog of Cats* sees Carthage abandoning Hester and Josie to wed a younger woman, driven by desires for enhanced wealth and social status. In this pursuit, he forsakes both Hester and Josie, emblematic of his betrayal in the name of societal advancement. Caroline, meanwhile, becomes a commodity facilitating Carthage's ascent. Her union with Carthage symbolizes a transition from the fertile, feminized bog to the realm of masculine domesticity. The wedding starkly contrasts Caroline's representation of prosperity with Hester's defiance against societal constraints. Hester's disruption of the ceremony, donning a wedding dress in protest, embodies her resistance to colonial and patriarchal norms.

Caroline's father, Xavier Cassidy, reacts furiously to these events, portraying a callous demeanor despite his status as the town's wealthiest and most influential figure. His exploitation of power and aggression to dominate and possess women reflects his ruthlessness. Xavier's actions, from poisoning his son to attempting an assault on Hester and insinuating violation of Big Josie, exemplify his embodiment of colonial patriarchal values. He goes as far as pressuring Carthage to adopt similar destructive behaviors, emphasizing the primacy of land and dominance in their society (69).

HESTER: If you're trying to destroy some high idea I have of her you're wastin' your time. I've spent long hours of



all the long years thinkin' about her. . . Sure there was a time I hated her and wished the worst for her, but I've taught meself to rise above all that is cruel and unworthy in me thinkin' about her. . . I have memories your cheap talk can never alter (*Bog of Cats* 318).

Drawing from Declan Kiberd's theory on Ireland's embodiment of the English subconscious, Gladwin offers insight into the intricate relationship between bogs and colonial history. He posits that the landscape of bogs mirrors patterns of colonial manipulation and dominance, with their dark past of colonial subjugation deeply etched into their essence. This subconscious resonance has a history of cultural erasure and is palpable not only among those dwelling within the bogs but also within the broader Irish collective consciousness (393). It then becomes plausible to interpret Hester's bond with the land through the lens of collective trauma inflicted by colonialism. Metaphorically, the bog emerges as a repository of Ireland's past, where colonial memories linger unscathed by decay.

Hester's unwavering attachment to the bog thus embodies her connection to Ireland's traumatic history, tethering her inexorably to its depths. Moreover, her fervent resistance against efforts to dispossess her of her home by landowner Xavier and his son-in-law Carthage symbolically echoes the land policies of colonial rule, echoing the dispossession inflicted by English colonizers. Olwen Fouéré remarks that Hester's defiance is not just personal but reflects a broader cultural resistance against colonial encroachment, a struggle for recognition and existence (170). Indeed, Hester's adamant assertion, "I was born on the Bog of Cats and on the Bog of Cats I'll end me days . . . this place holds me to it in ways it has never held yees" (*Bog of Cats* 282), underscores her innate claim to the land as a native whose identity is deeply intertwined with it.

In stark contrast, Carthage and Xavier relentlessly endeavor to strip Hester of her home, her daughter, and her dignity, embodying patriarchal colonialism's persistent grip. Faced with the relentless onslaught of colonial oppression, Hester's final act of defiance becomes an imperative. She sets ablaze everything she holds dear: her home, the barn, and all living creatures within. In a harrowing culmination, she commits the unthinkable act of infanticide and then suicide. Throughout *Bog of Cats*, each violent act Hester

perpetrates is driven not by aggression but by a fierce determination to affirm her identity, safeguard her land, and confront the profound loss of her mother. It is crucial to differentiate Hester's violence from that of Xavier and Carthage. While her actions may seem unforgivable, even in the moment of unspeakable brutality, Hester's tenderness and love towards Josie remain palpable. Before committing the unfathomable deed of slitting her own daughter's throat, she softly coos: “It's alright, I'll take ya with me, I won't have ya as I was, waitin' a lifetime for somewan to return, because they don't, Josie” (*Bog of Cats* 325).

Furthermore, Hester solemnly pledges to Josie their joint haunting of the bog, a vow ensuring that they shall never be forcibly displaced. The land and their existence are intrinsically intertwined, belonging solely to them. Hester's devotion to Josie transcends all other affections, yet she agonizingly opts to end her daughter's life to spare her from a fate predetermined by familial legacy. Their bond, forged in shared trauma, echoes through generations, binding them to the bog as Hester's mother once where each generation inheriting the burdens of the past. As Gladwin suggests, Hester's return to the bog symbolizes a cyclical journey of birth, death, and rebirth, driven by her autonomy (195). Her sacrifice stands in stark contrast to nationalist narratives of goddess sacrifices, highlighting her agency amidst societal constraints.

Hester's sacrificial deeds stem from her resolve to break free from subjugation and dismantle the web of colonial and patriarchal barriers, notably the notion of land ownership thrust upon her. She takes her daughter's life partly because she believes death is preferable to perpetuating her mother's trauma. Moreover, the act underscores the generational toll of land loss and cultural erasure, revealing enduring repercussions. Stripped of her land and heritage, Hester is left adrift, finding agency only through self-sacrifice. Her final, albeit gruesome, actions reject the passive victimhood imposed upon her, defiantly challenging the ownership enforced upon her. Ultimately, her desperate struggle for survival leads her back to the melancholic bog, where she finds herself ensnared once more in its somber embrace.

By delving into its setting, Carr's *Bog of Cats* unveils the enduring link between the landscape and the inhabitants who identify it as their abode.

It also explores alternative interpretations of the bog as a feminine realm, aligning with conventional perspectives that associate gender with the Irish soil. Carr's narrative unfolds as a poignant tapestry that echoes the timeless cadence of a landscape steeped in mystery and symbolism. Physical and metaphysical realms intertwine with the bog, shaping destinies from birth to demise. In *Bog of Cats*, the bog symbolizes opposition, serving as a refuge and an opportunity for women seeking liberation. A wellspring of spiritual contentment, woven with threads of bereavement and yearning, it epitomizes resilience and endurance in life's challenges.

## Conclusion

Carr's play delves into the various aspects of the bog, including its natural and supernatural elements. While the bog has often been overlooked in Irish literary studies, Carr argues that it deserves greater recognition as an ecological phenomenon. She emphasizes the significance of bogs in Irish studies and the environment, challenging the notion that they are peripheral. According to Carr, bogs have always occupied a central role in Irish society, serving as a refuge for marginalized communities, narratives, supernatural beings, and historical events.

Carr's *Bog of Cats* intricately transforms the bog from mere scenery into a rich tapestry of symbolism that mirrors the complexities of Irish history and identity, while also exploring the themes of trauma and defiance. Through the lens of colonialism, patriarchy, and individual autonomy, Carr crafts a narrative that resonates with deeper societal struggles. The bog, with its haunting presence and indelible ties to the characters, serves as a potent metaphor for resilience and defiance against oppressive forces. Through Gladwin's and Fouéré's analyses, the play's significance is underscored, revealing the enduring power of storytelling to illuminate the human condition.

In summary, Carr's *Bog of Cats* depicts the inherent connection between the bog and the female characters, who perceive the bog as a familiar and domestic environment. It transcends the boundaries of conventional narratives, drawing the audience into a captivating world where the bog is not merely a physical entity but a dynamic force intricately shaping lives and destinies. Carr's deft navigation between the tangible reality and the mythic realm results in a play that is richly layered with elements of Irish

mythology and Freudian analysis. The bog, in this context, transforms into a metaphorical womb—a source of spiritual fulfillment and a realm where Hester confronts the depths of her fears and desires. The presence of mythical characters, notably the enigmatic Catwoman, becomes integral to Hester's transformative journey, showcasing Carr's ability to seamlessly blend classical influences with contemporary themes.

Delving deeper into the broader cultural and ecological significance of bogs, especially in Irish literature, reveals a multifaceted tapestry that extends beyond mere geographical landscapes. In *Bog of Cats*, the bog becomes a space intricately interwoven with cultural identity, historical narratives, memories, and the complex relationships between humans and their environment. Drawing on the metaphorical lens of Aldo Leopold and Terry Eagleton's assertion that bogs unveil the past as an ever-present force, this exploration underscores the profound impact of Irish bogs on the cultural imagination. Emphasizing the ecological richness of bogs as habitats for carnivorous plants and preservers of bodies and artifacts, the narrative aligns with Seamus Heaney's portrayal of bogs as storehouses and repositories, highlighting the profound connection between the land and its people.

Transitioning into the literary realm, *Bog of Cats* paints bogs not only as physical settings but as purgatorial spaces laden with symbolic significance. Hester's deep attachment to the bog serves as a powerful symbol of the Irish people's enduring connection to their history and identity. An in-depth exploration of Hester's character unveils a narrative that challenges colonial tendencies and critiques the historical implications of land ownership in Ireland. Hester's violent acts are portrayed as desperate attempts to assert her identity, safeguard her heritage, and reconcile with the loss of her mother. The intergenerational trauma embedded in Hester's story underscores the lasting impact of efforts to displace individuals from their land and culture. Despite the tragic elements, Hester's sacrifices are framed as a form of agency and resistance against colonial and patriarchal barriers.

While initially appearing distinctly Irish in nature, the bog, when explored by writers, gradually reveals deeper layers of meaning and presents novel avenues for analysis. This multifaceted nature of the bog continues to inspire Irish literature, as evidenced by its significant presence in contemporary drama. In summary, the examination of Irish bogs from diverse

perspectives and literary examples reveals them as dynamic spaces where nature, culture, history, and identity converge. This nuanced understanding enriches our appreciation of their profound significance in both Irish literature and broader cultural discourse, showcasing how they serve as potent symbols that resonate beyond their physical boundaries.

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