UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA

CENTRO DE COMUNICAÇÃO E EXPRESSÃO CCE

DEPARTAMENTO DE LÍNGUAS E LETRAS ESTRANGEIRAS - DLLE

SOPHIA CATARINA ROSA

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THE DOUBLE IN MARINA CARR'S 'GROW A MERMAID'

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso, apresentado ao Curso de Letras – Inglês da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina como requisito para obtenção do título de bacharel em Letras – Inglês.

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Alinne Balduino Pires Fernandes

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2022

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Prof. Alinne Fernandes, for supporting me in every single step I've taken during this graduation. Attending your classes, having those extraordinary conversations with you and getting to know a little bit more of you as a person in the past years really changed things for me, as fortunately you led me right into the path of Women's Studies, Irish Studies and Theatre. And when I fell to the very lowest of my existence, you were still there inspiring me to get back up—not merely in my academic life. I guess that is why you are the person that I want to make the proudest. Thank you, thank you so much for everything. Especially for not giving up on me.

I wish to acknowledge my friend Larissa for being so considerate, funny (God knows I need your sense of humour whenever I take my problems too seriously), understanding and always ready to give me a hug when things get tough. Know that the sky is (not) the limit for you. I am also very grateful for the love and support of the most incredible person ever, Pedro— you know I "have crossed oceans of time to find you." I cannot believe how fortunate I am to have you by my side. Last, but not least, a special thanks to my mom, who never fails to amaze me with her intellect. Hopefully, one day I'll accomplish a third of what you have achieved through hard and genius work.

Abstract

This study analyses the protagonist of the experimental short story 'Grow a Mermaid' (1994), written by contemporary Irish playwright Marina Carr, by exploring the relation between the presence of fantastical elements in the story and subjective processes in the character's psyche. The imaginary is alluded to in different ways throughout the tale, however, the object of study for the present research refers specifically to the mermaid which marks the protagonist's story for all her life. Considering the symbolism behind this magical being, from Greek mythology to fairy tales, as well as observing the interactions between the mermaid and the main character, it is possible to state that the mermaid transcends their initial status as a child's fantastical escapism, gradually becoming an Other that impacts directly on the construction of a self. Ultimately, this analysis investigates the hypothesis that the mermaid might be the manifestation of the protagonist's Double.

Keywords: Marina Carr; Grow a Mermaid; Double.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a protagonista do conto experimental 'Grow a Mermaid' (1994), escrito pela dramaturga irlandesa contemporânea Marina Carr, ao explorar a relação entre a presença de elementos fantásticos na história e processos subjetivos na psiquê da personagem. O imaginário é aludido de diversas formas no decorrer do conto, entretanto, o objeto de estudo da presente pesquisa refere-se especificamente à imagem da sereia, que marca a história da protagonista por toda a vida. Levando em consideração o simbolismo por trás desse ser, passando pela mitologia grega até os contos de fadas, bem como ao observar as interações entre a sereia e a personagem principal, é possível concluir que a sereia ultrapassa o seu status inicial de escapismo fantástico de uma criança, tornando-se um Outro que impacta diretamente na construção do eu. Em última análise, se investiga a hipótese de a sereia ser a manifestação do Duplo da protagonista nesta obra.

Palavras-chave: Marina Carr; Grow a Mermaid; Duplo.

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1. Introduction

Marina Carr is an Irish writer and playwright from the Midlands, currently living in Dublin, born in 1964. According to Fernandes (2018), Marina Carr, who holds the status of being a renowned author internationally, "is still practically unknown in Brazil. Carr is currently one of the most influential names in contemporary Irish theatre and is certainly the woman who has achieved most recognition in the history of Irish theatre" (Fernandes 31, our translation). In her career as a playwright, Carr received several awards, such as the Dublin Theatre Festival Best New Play Award for *The Mai* (1994), the Susan Smith Blackburn Award for *Portia Coughlan* (1996), and the Irish Times/ESB Award for Best New Play in 1998 for *By the Bog of Cats...* (Wood 2006). Her major works consist of plays that are usually analysed in two main periods. Carr's first plays are her own versions of some of Beckett's absurdist plays, whereas some of her later works, such as *The Mai*, narrate a more realistic theatre. Eventually, with plays such as *By the Bog of Cats...* and *Ariel*, Marina Carr turns to modern reinterpretations of Greek mythology, specifically Euripides's *Medea* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*, respectively (Wood 62-64). A significant part of the work that Carr is doing in recent years consists in bringing her plays, old and new, to the stage, alongside adaptations of classics such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (2016) and Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (2021). The main topics of her works are diverse but recurrent. Carr brings into focus "intimacy issues between the sexes" (Wood? 64), frequently problematizing gender roles, while at the same time dealing with topics such as fate, violence, the Irish landscape, hauntings, the imaginary, subversion, and inner conflicts. On this, Wood writes that

> [W]hile storytelling is central to her work, it is not always liberating. In Carr's plays the stories can be both a form of communal, even mythical, sharing and

the fate against which the characters struggle. Black humor energizes her best work, often capped by violent acts that simultaneously purify the action — by returning to a necessary order — and mark the final loss of freedom. (64)

It is important to notice that the violent aspect of Carr's works, as mentioned above, is often represented by contexts of psychological or physical abuse, family dysfunction, but even more blatantly, by death. Wood properly points out that the female characters in Carr's plays "seem trapped by the Greek sense of repetition" (65), and it is, in most cases, only through death (of the women themselves or the ones around them) that the disruptive cycles which surround the characters can come to an end. Therefore, one way to look at death in Carr's stories is that it symbolizes a subversive yet violent way to regain control over one's own life.

But however acknowledged as a playwright Marina Carr is, theatre is not all that she has written. As mentioned above, Carr also wrote the short story 'Grow a Mermaid', published in 1995, which is her one and only literary piece of prose, not written for the stage. For this, she was awarded the Hennessy Award for Best First Story (CARTY & BOLGER, 1995). It is also reasonable to say that, although the short story stands alone next to her theatre oeuvre, many of the topics and motifs aforementioned are also represented in the story, such as the notion of fate, death, child neglect, and the imaginary — all of which will be further discussed in this work.

'Grow a Mermaid' is set in the Irish district of Connemara and depicts the story of a little girl who, after coming across the advertisement of a mermaid that can be grown by those who purchase a certain product, starts imagining her life with the presence of said mermaid. It can be said that the tale is divided into two sections, in which the first one consists in depicting a series of events and adversities which mark the little girl's childhood, such as her problematic and sometimes abusive family relations, feelings of loneliness and exclusion, fantasies with a mermaid as her best

friend, and later on the child's mother committing suicide. The second section focuses
on the main character's life twenty years after those events and some of her actions as a
woman who is still dealing with inner struggles.

Throughout the short story, it becomes clear that the child lives in a
dysfunctional family. It is also clear that the mermaid represents some sort of escapism
for the child's subjectivity. In view of that, the present research aims to examine the
conflicts portrayed in Carr's story and the effects they have over the main character's
psyche. More precisely, this analysis will focus on the presence of the imaginary in
'Grow a Mermaid', considering that the mermaid figure plays a fundamental role in the
protagonist's life and consequently on her actions as she grows up.

1.1 Objectives

Based on the discussion above, the purpose of this work is to offer an analysis of
the protagonist of Marina Carr's short story 'Grow a Mermaid', taking into
consideration not only the family setting or the social and cultural context in which the
child lives, but also addressing the presence of the imaginary in the story in order to
discuss her psychological traits and nuances more thoroughly. Specifically, the present
research aims to answer the following questions: What does the mermaid symbolize in
the story? What are some of the traumas that affect the main character's sense of
identity, especially the ones created inside the mother-daughter dynamics? How does
death appear in the story as both tragedy and a subversive act for the women characters?

To answer these questions, the methodological framework relies on the critical
analysis of the short story itself. For instance, I will look at some of the major events
that occur in the story and discuss the effects that they have on the child's demeanour
and psyche through a critical reading and investigation of the language employed, more

specifically the dialogues between the protagonist and others, as well as those that happen internally. Another fundamental aspect of this analysis entails an investigation of the child's relationships inside the family home, with a particular focus on the correlation between the protagonist and her own mother. Furthermore, the imagery portrayed in the short story, notably the fantastical elements and creatures that are presented, and some of its possible interpretations will also be addressed as they are equally important to this analysis.

In order to accomplish these objectives, this work is based mostly on the bibliographic research on areas such as Psychoanalysis and Literary Studies. Regarding the psychoanalytical theories, this analysis focuses particularly on works that address notions of subjectivity, identity and self (Rank, Bravo, and Santos). In addition to that, literary studies on the mermaid (Meneses, Vernant and Doueihi, and Lermant-Parès, for example) and its significance in different contexts throughout history complete the theoretical background of the present critical reading of Carr's short story. They inform this study in regard to the cases of Greek mythology as well as the popularization of fairy tales in nineteenth century Europe.

During the development of this research, it has come to my attention that although Marina Carr is a well-known contemporary playwright, who has received numerous awards for her work, including an award for the short story that motivates the present study, I was unable to find any thorough analysis of 'Grow a Mermaid', neither in Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina nor in other universities.

2. Review of Literature

As mentioned earlier, up to the present moment there has been little attention given to Marina Carr's 'Grow a Mermaid', although she is a prolific writer and the number of studies that are based on her repertoire is ever-increasing. However, it is important to notice that, to my knowledge, there is at least one essay and a book chapter written by some of the world's experts on the work of Marina Carr that do mention the short story even if just in passing. In this vein, this section is subdivided into three main parts: first, a very brief literature review of the works that somehow deal with the short story 'Grow a Mermaid'; second, mermaids in history and literature; and third, the concept of the Double.

2.1 Perspectives on 'Grow a Mermaid'

In a chapter of her highly relevant book, 'Women in Irish Drama', Melissa Sihra introduces the reader to the entirety of Carr's dramatical works up to 2007, offering a unique yet concise analysis of each play. At a certain point Sihra only briefly addresses the 'Grow a Mermaid' short story, when explaining the context behind Carr's famous play *The Mai* (1995). According to Sihra, this short story serves as the base for the play that would be published only a year later. She then starts by tracing parallels between the two, from a storytelling that embraces multiple generations of an Irish family's women in rural Ireland to the issue of a mother raising her children alone after being abandoned by her partner, and even to both works sharing the same landscape of the Connemara region.

Apart from pointing out the correlation between these two stories, Sihra also states that there are traces of Carr's "theatrical voice" in the experimental 'Grow a Mermaid' short story through an "evocative mingling of everyday details – a blue formica table – with the otherworld, of mermaids, ghosts and fairies, [that] emerges

here with assurance, becoming one of the defining features of her dramaturgy" (208). Indeed, Carr's deliberate use of a subliminal and visual yet childlike language in the short story is one of the aspects that will be addressed in the present analysis, after all, this particular use of language directly translates into a remarkable construction of the main character's subjectivity and imaginary.

The second work that discusses 'Grow a Mermaid' is Mika Funahashi's essay for an IASIL (The Irish Association for the Study of Irish Literature) conference[1] in which she considers the short story as the subtext behind Carr's writings as a playwright. As did Sihra, Funahashi also draws several comparisons between 'Grow a Mermaid' and *The Mai* throughout her essay, however, the latter dives a little deeper in the short story's events and nuances, and even highlights the absence of studies that emphasize on this particular work when the tale is actually "of great significance as the nucleus of Carr's plays".

Funahashi observes that a particular topic noticeable in Carr's theatre is depicted in 'Grow a Mermaid' as well: the fact that the home is far from an ideal shielding place from the dangers of the world, but rather "a space of entrapment from which no family member can easily escape" (141). In this respect, Funahashi pays particular attention to the character of the mother and the physical abuse that she inflicts upon the child and her little brother, bringing up for discussion the nature of these violent impulses. According to Funahashi, the disturbing and aggressive acts committed by the mother are the result of a frustrated maddening Medea-like urge to get revenge on the husband that has abandoned her (145). Thus, the mother's anger is not directly towards her children, but rather at her own fate, or rather the situation in which she finds herself without support, without an identity and without a voice. Funahashi then points out the irony

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[1] For more information, see: http://www.iasil.org/archive/conferences/galway/edc.html

behind the mother's suicide later on in the story—going into the lake and drowning herself "is just a continuation of the struggle of her life, that is, a gradual deprivation of oxygen" (147).

2.2. The mermaid throughout history

The mermaid is a popular figure that for centuries has appeared in the folklore from all parts of the world but has its origins in the Greek mythology. According to Meneses (2020), mermaids appear throughout the Classic Antiquity, in the works of authors such as Homer, Plutarch, Euripides, Plato, Apollonius Rhodius, Strabo, and more. However, it is "in the Odyssey—at least concerning the Greco-Roman world— [that] this *topos* crosses time and spaces and will emerge in myths from other cultural sources, other modulations" (72).

Mermaids—called *sirens* in Antiquity—were considered, according to Vernant and Doueihi (1986), "feminine figures of death" whose appeal was in the dichotomy of desire versus fear, pleasure versus death (55). In the Odyssey, the sirens appear as half-woman half-bird creatures that possess extraordinary knowledge and are responsible for seducing all humans that dare to come near them and hear their singing. The sirens would then transform humans into easy prey by petrification, before killing and eating them. The solution for Odysseus and his crew, therefore, is to cover their ears with wax in order to survive a trip across the island of the sirens before they could continue to carry on with their journey. About the predatory seduction of the sirens in Homer's work, Vernant and Doueihi state that:

> Up to this point everything about these bird-women seems clear. Their cries, their flowering meadow (*leimon*, meadow, is one of the words used to designate female genitalia), their charm (*thelxis*) locates them in all their irresistibility unequivocally in the realm of sexual attraction, or erotic appeal. At the same time, they are death, and death in its most brutally monstrous

aspect: no funeral, no tomb, only the corpse's decomposition in the open air. Pure desire, pure death, without any social adjustment from any side. (60)

Bearing that in mind, one can say that the sirens occupied a somewhat liminal space in Greek culture, iconography and mythology, both as beings that live between worlds— land and sea—and as creatures with a proportional power to seduce as well as to destroy: their beauty can only be matched by their capacity for inflicting a horrifying death.

In her essay about mermaids in ancient times, Lermant-Parès (2000) creates three divisions when discussing texts written by Classical authors in which the mythological creature appears. In the first group, the mermaid emerges as characters in adventurous tales in oral tradition and epic poems—Homer's Odyssey being the most distinctive title to ever depict sirens with detail in the Greco-Roman world, so much that to date we still turn to Homeric storytelling when studying this folkloric figure. The second group refers to texts of the scientific and philosophical fields from Classical antiquity which address the issue of mermaids or sirens, as in the case of works written by Strabo, Plato and Cicero. Strabo, for instance, is the author of an extensive geographical research in which he affirms that mermaids are beings that live in the sea at the south of Italy, whereas Cicero discussed the intelligence of such creatures. Finally, in the third group the mermaids appear as "allusions, as in elements of comparison for different types of discourse and of singing" (829). Lermant-Parès references Pausanias' report that Sophocles would have been called as "the new Siren" by an oracle. Due to the mermaid myth, this title would have spoken about Sophocles' ability to seduce and enchant with his words.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there has been a change in the way mermaids are perceived and represented today. Meneses explains that, although described as bird-women in the Classical period, a new tradition, in which mermaids became half-women

half-fish was established. In the latter, mermaids would not be seen as monsters that symbolize death, but as divinities (72). About the start of a new tradition in regard to the mermaid's body, Emily Wilson, a translator of Homer, said in an interview[2] that the menacing and even monstrous figure of the ancient siren was replaced with the image of "water nymphs like the Lorelei, a nineteenth-century poetic creation whose seductive songs lured men to their deaths along the Rhine River". She then adds that it is possible to see a shift in the iconography during this period that correspond to the popularization of such imagery, in a way that the old notion of the half-woman half-bird body was left behind by modern writers. Robertson (2013) discusses not only the physical change in the mermaid's appearance, but also its diverse representations in Western culture:

> As the mermaid began to take shape as we know her today, a therian-thropic being, half woman-half fish, she assumed numerous traits from other fantastic beings, making her a composite creature in more ways than one. Sometimes she sings like a siren, other times she is mute, incapable of human speech entirely. Sometimes she possesses magical powers over water and weather, other times she yearns to be near the Christian God by acquiring a soul, the grace-given privilege of the human species. In the latter case she is a sympathetic character, like the titular mermaid of Hans Christian Andersen's enduring fairytale, *The Little Sea Maiden*, also known as *The Little Mermaid* (2005 [1837]). (306)

In accordance with Robertson's idea that today our cultural expectation concerning the mermaid is that of a sympathetic character, Deport (2017) examines fairy tales, specifically the stories that evoke mermaids, and what effects these characters have on the public. With regard to fairy tales, Deport (2017) states that these are stories frequently resulting from the peasantry folklore in the modern period, which was mostly oral, and have become internationally known through the dissemination of written folklore and literature (2). Deport goes on to talk about the importance of

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[2] For further context of the interview, see: https://www.audubon.org/news/sirens-greek-myth-were-bird-women-not-mermaids/

Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen, who in the nineteenth century not only

revisited stories from European folklore but was also the pioneer of "an authorial model

of fairy tales", such as *The Little Mermaid* (4). Along the same lines, Robertson (2013)

explains that this specific fairy tale, among other recent representations of the mermaid,

helped legitimize the fantastical creature in our cultural imaginary and that today the

mermaid:

> continues to haunt and enchant, playing off our dual fascination and anxiety
> regarding things maternal, marvellous, and marine. Our modern interest in
> developing, understanding, even discovering this mysterious creature is,
> however, less framed in terms of teratological obsession, and more in terms of
> self-reflexivity—what the other-than-human can tell us about the *human,*
> about ourselves. (307)

The discussion raised by Robertson concerning the process of self-reflexivity

that happens when human is faced with the "other-than-human" proves to be extremely

relevant when analysing the relationship between the protagonist in 'Grow a Mermaid'

and the mythological being created in her imaginary so carefully that it blurs the lines

between real and fantasy, between the child's human status and her desire to become

herself a mermaid. Robertson's concept and its importance to this critical reading of

Carr's short story will be further examined in the analysis itself.

2.3 The Double

It is noticeable, as seen above, that the relationship between the little girl in the

story and the mermaid raises questions and diverse possibilities of interpretation with

respect of the child's life, more specifically of her social isolation in the real world and

her own sense of identity. Regarding the latter, the present analysis aims to examine

whether, in creating the mermaid, the child did more than just produce an alternative

world that she could turn to in order to escape her reality or whether her subjective

idealization of the mermaid became so elaborate that the fantastical being actually took the form of a Double in the protagonist's life: an unconsciously desired version of herself. In order to discuss such matter, a deepened understanding of the concept of the Double—and how one can verify it in literary works—proves necessary, as can be seen in this section.

The study conducted by Nicole Fernandez Bravo (2000) will be the major reference for the present research, given the fact that Bravo focuses on the concept of the Double and its variations in Western literature throughout History. Bravo starts by stating that duality is a process of the self's subjectivity, and that the Double can be defined as a literary myth that was given emphasis especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although its origins can be traced back to ancient times in characters such as Sophocles' Oedipus. And in order to illustrate the timeline suggested in her research, Bravo analyses the apparition of the Double in several literary works in canonical literature, including but not limited to authors such as Miguel de Cervantes, Oscar Wilde, E.T.A. Hoffman, Edgar Allan Poe, Hermann Hesse, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Luigi Pirandello and Jorge Luis Borges.

Bravo explains that the notion of the human duality is probably as old as any cultural element regarding the concept of identity. Indigenous divinities, German legends and even the biblical *Genesis* provide examples of a dual nature. Bravo suggests that these stories often rely on the figuration of a few complementary opposites, such as the notions of male and female, human and animal, and life and death. According to Bravo, religions such as Christianity would also adopt these ideas in order to create and disseminate the dichotomy of good versus evil, which eventually becomes an important aspect of multiple artistic works, from literature to visual arts—as for instance in the vast imagery in the Western world displaying angels of Heaven

against the Devil or any devilish form—, and that in some way depict the concept of duality.

Nevertheless, from the early twentieth century on, most studies that refer to the concept of the "Double" rely on a new theoretical perspective, the psychological one, heavily influenced by the interpretation that the psychoanalyst Otto Rank publishes in 1914 about the subject. According to Bravo, Rank defends two theses. In the first one, he prioritizes an analysis of the writer's personalities, and builds his arguments from mythological traditions that psychoanalysis have adopted, such as the discussion of the Narcissus and Ego myths. In the second one, Rank connects the Double with the issue of death, or its presage, and the self's survival instinct. Regarding this perspective, Bravo states that the Double would be "a personification of the immortal soul that becomes the soul of the dead, the reason why one protects one's self from total destruction, which entails that the Double is perceived as a 'frightening messenger of death'" (263). Bravo suggests that the psychoanalytical approach proved to be even more fruitful in relation to this topic, mentioning the studies conducted by Rogers, Tymms, Keppler, Arenberg, and W. Krauss (263).

In her final remarks, Bravo reflects upon the changes seen regarding the concept of the Double throughout time, given the examples analysed. Bravo concludes that the Double frequently appears in relation to the issues of madness and of death in the works of writers influenced by the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. In the Romantic period, the dichotomy of good versus evil and notions such as the finiteness of life and the infinity of the soul were very much present in various artistic expressions. Today, Bravo states, the apparition of the Double offers a new perspective about the substance of a self that accepts one's condition of being a fragmented subject, as in a process of liberation. In her own words, "[the] alterity inside the self is what

allows a dialogue, a reunion, even solidarity towards the other [...], a possibility for improvement" (287).

3. Short Story Analysis and Discussion

In order to facilitate the identification and analysis of the events in Carr's tale, it is my understanding that the short story is divided into several parts, all of which are graphically marked by the author when introducing different episodes in the protagonist's life.

'Grow a Mermaid' tells the story of a little girl who becomes mesmerized by the sight of a mermaid in a fishbowl that is painted in a blue formica table. It is an advertisement that promises that for only 25 cents, one can have mermaid seeds and cultivate them until a mermaid is fully grown. While the child attempts to convince her mother to buy the mermaid seeds, we learn about the configuration of the family in the story: the girl lives with her mother, grandmother and little brother, whereas the father is an absent figure that from time to time decides to come back home, never for enough time. None of the characters have names.

The short story begins during the construction of a new house for the family, a house by a lake in the Connemara district, where a few palaces can be seen. The new house is an initiative from the mother, and we soon discover that what it represents is the promise of a permanent return of the father to his family. As the house is being built, we learn more about the relationship between mother and daughter. They spend most of the time together since the last time the father came to see them and then left, and it is evident that their relation is that of a love and hate dynamics. Love, because the mother seems to care for her children despite the situation in which she finds herself, that of suffering from being abandoned by her partner; and hate, because the mother can sometimes be violent towards both her son and her daughter, leaving the protagonist to

deal with feelings of imprisonment, especially at night, in the arms of a mother that literally takes her to the brink of suffocation. The child, after seeing the mermaid in her dreams, becomes increasingly attached to the mythological figure, to the point of having imaginary interactions with it, as a type of escapism.

Eventually, the father returns home as if nothing ever happened, and this time stays long enough so that the new house is ready to receive its residents. The day in question, although having begun happy, ends up tragically, with the father leaving again, this time in the middle of the night. This is a turning point in the story, since it is because of it that the mother starts to isolate herself more and more each day, until she decides at last to enter the lake and not return, committing suicide. Afterwards, the child watches as the authorities drain water from the lake in order to retrieve the mother's body, thinking that her mother and the mermaid are not so different now. After the suicide, the father comes back permanently to take care of the children.

In the plot, then, an ellipsis fast-forwards time in about twenty years. The mermaid is long forgotten. When the child, now a woman, is shown again, we see her throwing her mother's wedding ring in the trash. In the following and last part, the protagonist finds herself in a swimming pool, in which she reenacts the same action as that of her mothers, twenty years before, and dives deeper and deeper into the water. Although not explicitly stated in the short story, one can infer the protagonist's decision of dying when "[it] seems she will never reach the bottom, then she does" (Carr 139), which expresses clear intent in what she was doing. Right at the moment when she reaches the bottom of the pool, the character finds the mermaid again alongside the promise of a magic kingdom underwater, a city about which she had dreamt a long time before.

It is Robertson's notion of self-reflexivity that will accompany us along the analysis of 'Grow a Mermaid' regarding the mermaid's apparition. Effectively, the mermaid in Marina Carr's short story is very much alive in the imagination of the protagonist. In fact, there is enough textual evidence for us to consider the possibility that the mermaid is in fact more than the child's form of escape from her own reality: her reflection, extension or even an Other created by her, since the other is "the self's constitutive matrix" (Ravasio 155). Having that in mind, it is inferred herein that this fantastical being actually transcends its initial status as a mere element of the child's imaginary and pastime, as it will be explored, consequently assuming a more significant and symbolic position in the course of the short story.

In 'Grow a Mermaid', the mermaid does not appear as a Homeric creature, a predator who causes fear; on the contrary, it instigates trustworthiness and amiability on the child's part. The mermaid is presented as a friendly being who offers possibilities in a magical underwater world, which is receptive to the interaction with human beings. At first glance the mythological creature is nothing more than an advertisement designed to introduce an object of desire in the little girl's life, one that did not exist before:

> The child leaned across the blue formica table and read the advertisement, her grubby little fingers leaving snail tracks under the words — GROW YOUR OWN MERMAID.
> The child looked at the words in amazement, read it again, slowly, more carefully this time. The same. Underneath the caption was an ink drawing of a tiny mermaid in a fish bowl, waving and smiling up from the page. Behind her was a sea-horse. He too was smiling. The child, bewitched by the mermaid's smile, smiled back and waved shyly to the tiny beautiful fish woman. Send 25 cents, the advertisement said, and we will send you a mermaid and sea-horse seeds. You put them into water and they grow and can even talk to you. The child imagined waking up at night and going to the fishbowl for a little chat with the mermaid. (Carr 130)

It is thus not the illustration of the mermaid in itself that causes the girl to be "amazed", but the promise of a product that comes to life and eventually performs a role—the promise of social inclusion ("they grow and can even talk to you"). The mermaid, therefore, becomes an objectifiable being, or even the child's fetish: she starts to imagine a suddenly fascinating and special life, in which the mermaid's presence becomes indispensable so that this magical effect happens. According to Maria Rita Kehl (2008), the fetish is created exactly when "the product presented as capable of 'adding value' to [one's] personality promotes [one's] imaginary inclusion in the desire system, in the composition of character, which moves the consumer society" (27, our translation).

Despite the little girl's insistence so that her mother buys the mermaid seeds, it is possible to see that the child starts, in a way, to cultivate the magical creature in her mind even before that happens. One example would be when she imagines her new room as having the same colours as that of a "mermaid's room", which consequently would draw the mermaid to her house (Carr 132). A further example of the mermaid's creation in the imaginary of the child would be at night, during what seems to be a daily ritual in which the mother has the daughter in her arms at bedtime, holding her in a suffocating hold. It is clear that the little girl wants to break free. Her only escape is, therefore, to consummate in her own mind the possibility of having a mermaid in her life, when she "lay[s] there in the dark, growing a mermaid" (132). Afterwards, when the child takes hold of the seeds and reads the instructional steps in order to make the creature appear, the mermaid slowly begins to take a more concrete shape with the numerous interactions that the child imagines between them. This creation process extends to the child's unconsciousness when she dreams about the mermaid:

> First the water from the lake of palaces, then a tupperware box, then pour in the mermaid seeds and stir it all gently and the next day a mermaid would be

floating on her back, smiling at the child. And the child would say, "Hello little
mermaid". And the mermaid would sing a song for the child about the sea,
about castles and whales and turtles and whole cities and families who lived
under the sea. And the child would tell the mermaid all about school and her
friend Martina, who played with her sometimes, and about the time they saw
a balloon in the sky and chased it for hours. The child would tell her about
Pollonio, the fairy she never saw, but knew lived down Mohia Lane. To make
it more interesting for the mermaid, the child would pretend that she often met
Pollonio. The child slept as the mermaid grew away out in the dark at the edge
of the child's dream. (Carr 132-3)

The citation above is extremely relevant for an analysis of the mermaid and its
role in the protagonist's life. Firstly, the mermaid would fill an empty space in the little
girl's social life. Martina, a character briefly mentioned, seems to be the child's only
friend who "played with her sometimes" (133); however, their scarce encounters are far
from a solution for the isolation in which the protagonist lives. The mermaid would then
appear as an Other, created by the child herself, capable of keeping her company and
aggregating meaning to her days. In addition to this, and perhaps most importantly, is the
fact that this Other entails a possibility of escaping the only life that the girl knows; an
Other that presents a magical and more fascinating alternative in relation to marine beings
and civilizations that immediately leaves the child in awe.

In psychoanalysis, the Double is nothing more than the manifestation of an Other
that lives inside oneself for most of their life. Such manifestation would be materialized
through the creation or the illusion of a being separated from the self; in other words, the
Double would be the realization of the *alter ego*[3] (Finkler qtd. in Santos 71). In
accordance with that, Bravo (263) states that the Double "is always a fascinating figure
to whom it duplicates in virtue of the paradox it represents (the Double is at the same time

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[3] "It is a compound generated from *alter*, which means 'another being or another person in relation to a
particular individual' [...] and *ego*, which means 'the self of any individual'" (Ferreira qtd. in Santos 71).

interior and exterior, it is here and there [...]), and provokes extreme feelings in the original."

In narrative studies, the Double can be depicted in several ways, some of them being the substitute, the rival or antagonist, or even as "a complementary/auxiliary being" (Santos 71), which is the configuration that most closely resembles the mermaid in Carr's short story. Moreover, Santos discusses the possible relations that a character might have with its duplicated self when creating the categories of positive Double and negative Double:

> The particular manner in which the relationship with the *other* will happen depends on the context and how the "self" will judge them. In the cases in which there is a process of both identification and complicity (positive Double), the relationship will be harmonious, beneficial and peaceful. However, in the cases in which there are no similarity in the ways of feeling, thinking and acting (negative Double), but the reunion of diametrically opposite characters, a relationship of tension and conflict will happen, and the *other* might assume the position of an adversary that challenges the "self". (71, our translation)

The categories proposed above only make it easier for one to affirm that the issue of the Double is directly connected to the construction an individual's self. In addition to this, Santos continues to state that "it is through alterity, through the acceptance and perception of the *other's* values, from the identification of difference that they elicit that the process of self-understanding is realized, resulting in a continuous accomplishment of the identity" (72).

Considering what has been said about Carr's short story thus far in relation to the depiction of the mermaid, as well as taking into account the categories of Double mentioned above and the process of identity construction through difference, one can infer that the mythical creature in 'Grow a Mermaid' would fit into the category of the positive Double. Although the fact that the protagonist has to rely on an escapist

behaviour in order to cope with the events of her life is far from ideal, it is noticeable throughout the story that the mermaid has in fact positive effects on the child: from the mere delight of a new pastime to the comforting thought that the child belongs somewhere else, where magical and loving beings are waiting for her arrival.

Furthermore, one may see that the mermaid not only is important to the little girl's emotional development since the child grows extremely attached to the creature, but it also represents a milestone of great relevance due to the identification process that occurs subjectively in the child, as a desire to participate in the culture of that fantastical Other. An example of such yearning would be in the fifth part in which the girl, after being severely chastised by the mother "with a wooden hanger" that left "welps as big as carrots on her legs", imagines herself talking to a marine similar to the mermaid, a man holding a trident, before asking him "How long?", to which the merman answers "Soon, soon" (Carr 133-4). Here there are a few possible interpretations, including that the child could be wanting to know how much longer she would have to wait for the mermaid to arrive, or else how much longer it would take for her to escape from this world and become one of the merfolk. In both cases, it appears that there is a clear desire for the inclusion or the acceptance of the little girl's self in the sphere of an Other.

In a study that analyses several representations of the Double in Western literature, Santos argues that the Double can be depicted in a flexible manner, depending on the context of each literary work. "One can see that this theme has been expressed, in a recurring fashion, through the following elements: the shadow, the reflection on water or on a mirror, the image captured by a painting/portrait/photograph, lookalikes and brothers (twins or otherwise)" (86). In the case of Carr's short story, the mermaid is presented as an illustration in an advertisement, which is afterwards posted

on a blue formica table. Bearing that in mind, it would be possible to consider the illustration of the mermaid as something similar to the photograph in the configuration proposed by Santos.

However, as time elapses, it becomes clear that the child grows frustrated by the absence of the real mermaid, a mermaid that does not live only in her own imagination. The next two depictions of the mermaid are opposite in value: at first glance, the magical creature is singing in a happy moment when the child's family is gathered to move to a new house. The second scene is based on the child's comparison between the mermaid and her mother who just committed suicide in the lake in front of the house. At that moment, both her mother and the mermaid have become beings that are hiding somewhere underwater.

It is after these events that the protagonist's disappointment in the fact that the mermaid never existed besides in her own imagination becomes clear, as well as a possible confirmation that the mermaid is very much tied to the little girl's identity. As mentioned earlier, there is a time lapse that divides the tale in two segments, and the ellipsis itself becomes a very important element in understanding the story and in extending this discussion on the relationship between the mermaid and the child's sense of identity. In the ellipsis described in the excerpt "[t]he child sleeps for twenty years. The mermaid who never came is long forgotten" (Carr 138), it becomes evident by the words "who never came" the child's yearning for an encounter with the mythological being, which would completely change her life. It becomes apparent that the only possible way for the protagonist to set the mermaid aside is when the little girl, given the tragic events that have marked her childhood, also leaves behind the innocent perspective that is so characteristic of childhood. The girl becomes a woman, a

condition that cannot accommodate the fascination that is felt by a child when believing in the promises of kingdoms and magical creatures.

The reunion happens at some point after twenty years of oblivion. At that point, which also marks the climax of the short story and simultaneously its ending, we see the protagonist entering a swimming pool. And as her mother had done two decades prior, she disappears in the water and does not return. When reaching the bottom, the character comes across fortress doors that suddenly open before the mermaid appears, smiling "that smile of years ago at the blue formica table" (139). Finally, both of them swim together, going even deeper.

There are a few important details to highlight about the final part of the short story. The first would be the type of language used to refer to the protagonist. Twenty years after the events in the protagonist's childhood have passed, we see that the narrator alludes to the character still in the same manner as it was at the beginning of the narrative, as a *child.* In the penultimate scene of the story, we see the child, now a grown woman, walking down the street when she "takes off her mother's wedding ring and hurls it in a dustbin" (138). There is a range of possible meanings to this sequence, among them the possibility that the protagonist could have experienced some sort of disillusion or disappointment in her life, perhaps even a romantic one, given the marital meaning that the wedding ring represents. Regardless of what would be the nature of the child's suffering at that instant, nonetheless, it is something that probably influences the character's following actions; in this case, she commits suicide afterwards.

Instants prior to her death, the narrator still refers to the protagonist as a child. In this particular moment, there could be a meaning between the lines of such action, a meaning that is deeply connected to the child's reunion with the mermaid: a reunion marked by the materialization of the magical being in front of the child, something that

the character could only dream of during her childhood. It is possible to say that, in a way, this is a reunion with herself. After all, if the last scene has shown us the protagonist getting rid of her mother's wedding ring in a frustrated and angry gesture, now the child seems happy and relieved when uttering: "At last, you've come at last" (139). And the fact that until recently the girl was asleep while her life passed by, according to the narrator, only strengthens the interpretation mentioned above, that the character is indeed talking to a part of herself that after all these years she is finally finding once again, in a long-awaited moment.

Perhaps the entire scene is the representation of the character's most intimate feelings, of a desire to return to her childhood, when she still believed that it was possible to become friends with mermaids and even live in a kingdom underwater, far away from the land where she lived. The noticeable relief behind the words "At last, you've come at last" (139) is possibly the same relief that the child feels by fulfilling her destiny that was traced two decades prior to that point, when the child first saw the illustration of the mermaid on a blue formica table. Despite the tragic nature of the protagonist's fate—it is a cycle which echoes the death of the mother who decades before went into the lake to never return—, perhaps the most powerful aspect in the main character's last act relies on the relief felt when in that final moment she, too, transforms herself into a mermaid.

4. Conclusion

In this study, I have conducted a critical reading of Marina Carr's short story, 'Grow a Mermaid', with emphasis on its protagonist: a little girl who lives with her mother, a little brother and her grandmother in a house by a lake in Ireland's Connemara region. The tale is set as soon as the child encounters the figure of a

mermaid which is so captivating that over time the mythical creature comes to life inside the girl's mind, notably during traumatic events, such as the father's neglect and the death of the mother. Albeit short, the short story provides a great set of topics that were addressed in the course of this study, such as the imaginary and the fantastic, dysfunctional family, abandonment issues, suicide—all of which are present throughout Carr's works—, to name a few.

In the analysis, I have considered the protagonist's actions, thoughts, dreams, traumas, fantasies with the mermaid, and her relations to others—especially her mother— in order to acquire a more extensive understanding of the character's psyche and progression throughout the story. To properly discuss these aspects of her subjectivity, the major events were investigated, as well as their possible effects on the child's already existing internal conflicts. Additionally, it has been suggested an interpretation where, by the time the tale comes to an end, the mermaid has stopped symbolizing a mere escape strategy for the girl's sufferings but has rather become directly influential over the protagonist's dreams and identity formation. More specifically, this perspective goes as far as to defend the hypothesis that the mermaid in the short story is in fact the protagonist's Double, according to textual evidence and based on literary studies and psychoanalytical theory.

Although Marina Carr is a well-known and awarded contemporary playwright, and that most of her work is the focus of an increasing number of studies around the world, little has been said about the 'Grow a Mermaid' short story. Thus, my intent with this analysis is to contribute and somehow broaden the discussions related to Carr's oeuvre. It would be interesting to explore other aspects of the short story in future studies, such as a more thorough investigation on the representation of women

characters from different generations in a family, specifically with respect to their

emotional and social struggles in the Irish context.

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