Active Speech

Critical Perspectives on Teresa Deevy

Edited by
Úna Kealy and Kate McCarthy

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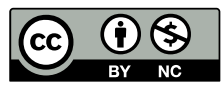

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 Suzanne Savage and Lianne Quigley performing in Teresa Deevy's *Possession* which was created and directed by Amanda Coogan in collaboration with Lianne Quigley, Alvean Jones, Linda Buckley, Dublin Theatre of the Deaf, and Cork Deaf Community Choir. Creative producer Lynette Moran produced *Possession* at the Project Arts Centre 21–24 February 2024, while Susan Holland produced the production at the Granary Theatre for the Cork Midsummer Festival performances, 21–23 June 2024. *Possession* was funded as part of ART:2023: A Decade of Centenaries Collaboration (the Arts Council and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media).

10. The Liminal Space of Widowhood in Teresa Deevy's *Wife to James Whelan* (1937)

Christa de Brún

As long as there has been a distinct Irish literature, it has been closely bound to Irish society, culture, and family relationships. Indeed, as Anne Enright observes, the family '[…] is the fundamental (perhaps the only) unit of Irish culture, and one which functions beyond our choosing'.[1] In Ireland, the notion of family has been traditionally located within the institution of marriage, which has been devised as the ultimate and highest purpose of heteronormative love relationships. This dominant narrative of Irish nationhood thus not only places the welfare of the nation in its own definition of family, but it also specifies the roles that women must play within such institutions. As Christopher Morash notes, women in Irish society in the early twentieth century were typically confined to the domestic sphere, and in Irish culture defined in relation to the other; mother, wife, sister, and daughter, and widows occupied the interstices of this culture.[2] This chapter focuses on widowhood and the cultural history of widowhood in Ireland particularly as it is explored in Deevy's *Wife to James Whelan*.[3] Rejected by Ernest Blythe, managing director of the Abbey Theatre, in 1942, the play explores the strictures and confines of conventional society. Deevy excels in delineating the lives of women who have historically been confined to the domestic sphere and the private domain, and are thus largely hidden from public

1 Anne Enright, 'The Irish Short Story', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2010, p. 14.
2 Christopher Morash, 'Teresa Deevy: Between the Lines', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, 2 vols, ed. by Jonathan Bank, John P. Harrington, and Christopher Morash (New York: Mint Theater, 2011 and 2017), I, ix.
3 Teresa Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, I.

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knowledge. This chapter claims a space for the narratives of widowhood in the public sphere as an integral part of the social fabric of Irish culture and creates a space for marginalised personal perspectives to inhabit and inform our cultural landscape.

In *Wife to James Whelan*, James Whelan, an ambitious, young man, leaves Nan Bowers and the town of Kilbeggan for a job in Dublin. James promises to return with better prospects, while Nan is left to contemplate their uncertain future. Act Two is set seven years later and James has returned to Kilbeggan as a successful businessman and 'sole proprietor' of The Silver Wings Motor Service.[4] Nan McClinsey is now a widow with a son and seeks work from James. At first obstinate, James eventually offers her a job performing administrative tasks but, after he finds her stealing money, he responds ruthlessly by having her sent to jail where she is sentenced to serve six weeks with hard labour. Set six months later, Act Three reveals unresolved tensions between James and Nan but, prompted by their mutual friend Kate, James re-employs Nan but this time 'to scrub the floor […] to tend the fire and clean the grate'.[5] However, he reinstates her to her former administrative work when she reveals that Bill McGafferty had attempted to blackmail Nan by falsely accusing her of theft.[6] James's success contrasts with his conflicted emotional state, and his relationships with Nora Keane and Kate Moran add further complexity, highlighting the conflict between ambition and happiness. Deevy masterfully weaves complex characters and themes, creating a narrative that resonates with the struggles of individual and social aspirations in an atmosphere of stultifying conformity.

Although there has been significant scholarship on the portrayal of women in Deevy's plays, the marginal identity of widowhood has received little critical attention. Indeed, the cultural history of widowhood in Ireland has been largely hidden from public knowledge, as widowhood pushes women into a liminal space both physically and socially. Furthermore, widowhood has, historically, been perceived as a disruption of social order and a potential threat to moral order in what Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin calls 'stagnant rural communities that

4 Ibid., p. 125.
5 Ibid., p. 143.
6 Ibid.

stifle the vitality and potential of young Irish women'.[7] A widow is, by definition, a liminal creature; she is not sexually intact, she is unattached to any male, her very unattachment a cause for anxiety, highlighting the danger inherent in existing in such a space. Deevy frequently explores the lives of women who exist in this liminal space, for example Nan Bowers in *Wife to James Whelan* and the eponymous Katie Roche. The situation of widowhood offers Deevy a unique opportunity to explore the social fabric into which such characters are woven, a society that defines and confines women and that struggles to contain the rupture to identity and ideology that widowhood presents.

Identities are created and performed in social and cultural contexts, characterised by historical and contemporary relations of power and control that can affect interpretations and psychological states. The dominant narrative, which upholds the centrality of the family unit and the role of women within that unit, may be ruptured by a transition which alters gendered expectations within a patriarchal society, and widowhood occupies such a space in Irish literature. Indeed, a review in the *Irish Times* noted 'All through the play, one seems to see an almost imperceptible change in the ordinary values of life'.[8] This space may be defined as a liminal space, which Toni Morrisson refers to as a place 'where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown'.[9] Describing the grief of widowhood as such a space is to suggest that the boundaries that previously provided a secure understanding of the world and sense of self have, following bereavement, become more permeable. One's sense of being in the world is disorientated in the event of loss. The experience of grief has the potential to destabilise the world one lives in and shatter the meanings people use to hold up their world. Widowhood constitutes a liminal space necessitating the structuring of a new identity. As Harriet Shortt observes it can also be 'an anxious time where, for example, known norms, behaviours and identities are suspended thus giving way to uncertainty'.[10] Spaces of

7 Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin, 'Sexuality, Marriage and Women's Life Narratives in Teresa Deevy's *A Disciple* (1931), *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935) and *Katie Roche* (1936)', *Estudios Irlandeses*, 7 (2012), 79–91 (p. 80).

8 'Miss Deevy's New Play', *Irish Times*, 17 March 1936, p. 5.

9 Toni Morrisson, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988), p. 78.

10 Harriet Shortt, 'Liminality, Space and the Importance of Transitory Dwellings at

liminality may be perceived as a threat to conservative society because it can provide limitless opportunity to forge new identities and thus allow for creativity and subversive acts due to the eradication of the normal structures that tend to inhibit or obstruct behaviour. It is this sense of unstructure that destabilises and threatens the socially constructed narrative of widowhood.

A key aspect of widowhood, then, is the loss of a stable and fixed idea of the self. Once the protection of a husband no longer exists, a woman's positionality is one of submission or subversion. The positionality of a widow thus hinges on an inverted binary; either she is perceived as helpless, like the widow represented in the *Irish National Magazine*, described as 'timid in the consciousness of unprotected helplessness', or she is positioned as an unattached woman with sexual experience but without a male guardian, in which case she is perceived as a threat.[11] Widowhood thus operates as a space wherein dominant ideologies can be renegotiated in terms of emergent ideologies to create a new ideological space. However, as Jonathan Miller points out, such liminal spaces are contested spaces because the dominant cultural modes of identification never give easily to emergent ideas that threaten to unseat those historically granted power and control over the dissemination of identity.[12] Widowhood, thus, can be defined as a liminal space characterised by grief, loss, and unknowing.

Arnold van Gennep first outlined the term liminality in his seminal text *Rites of Passage* and claimed that all passages through the cycle of life shared a three-fold sequential structure: separation, liminality, and aggregation. Separation refers to leaving the familiar behind, liminality refers to a time of testing, learning, and growth, and aggregation to a reintegration.[13] Victor Turner consolidated van Gennep's work defining liminal as 'a state betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony', but introduced the concept of threshold people who 'elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural

Work', *Human Relations*, 68.4 (2015), 633–658 (p. 637).

11 Thomas Le Messurier, 'The Widow', *The Irish National Magazine*, 1 (1846), p. 12.

12 Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 152.

13 Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1909), p. 26.

space'.[14] This concept of threshold people illustrates the ambiguity of the unique situation of widows in Irish society. As a liminal figure, the widow is outside the confines of culture and outside the boundaries of the socially and politically dictated space of womanhood. Most significantly, the widow never reaches a post-liminal stage because she is a figure perpetually defined by her past—by what she once was but has ceased to be.

According to Turner, all liminality must eventually dissolve, for it is a state of great intensity that cannot exist very long without some sort of structure to stabilise it. However, *Wife to James Whelan* provides a sobering example of a widow trapped in a form of permanent liminality far beyond what was initially defined as a temporal state.[15] Turner acknowledges that 'liminality becomes a permanent condition when any of the phases in this sequence becomes frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame' and the narrative of widowhood exists within a liminal phase that never actualises into a post-liminal state.[16] Turner further refers to liminal situations as positive periods of renewal. However, liminal situations can also be periods of existential angst and despair. Van Gennep describes this experience as a boundless, marginalised one often accompanied by isolation and the suspension of social status.[17] In such situations, people often live outside their normal environment where they come to feel nameless, spatio-temporally dislocated, and socially unstructured.[18] A lengthy period in this stage can become dangerous resulting in widows remaining permanently marginalised within society at best and considered superfluous to society at worst.

Wife to James Whelan offers an interior view of the loss, grief, and crisis suffered by the widow, Nan Bowers. The loss of a husband signifies not only the loss of a spouse, but the woman's loss of her identity; she is a woman who was, but is now no longer, a wife. Colm Tóibín, reflecting on his reading of Mary Lavin's stories of widowhood, observes:

14 Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), p. 34.

15 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 51.

16 Arpad Szakolczai, *Permanent Liminality and Modernity: Analysing the Sacrificial Carnival through Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 13.

17 van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, p. 114.

18 *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, ed. by Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra (New York: Oxford Press, 2015), p. 128.

> But the ones that dealt with the life of a widow were almost too close to the space between how we lived then in our house and what was unmentionable—the business of silence around grief, the life of a woman alone, the palpable absence of a man, a husband, a father, our father, my father, the idea of conversation as a way of concealing loss rather than revealing anything, least of all feeling.[19]

In *Wife to James Whelan*, Deevy similarly dramatises the silence surrounding these issues and how they were contained and restrained by stifling norms. Hers is, as Úna Kealy suggests, a 'theatre of subtext' rather than affirmation.[20] Deevy artfully sketches the story of Nan's emergent recognition of the liminal state she now occupies in the aftermath of her husband's death. The narrative conveys Nan's struggle to regain the identity 'she lost willingly in marriage, but lost doubly and unwillingly in widowhood'.[21]

Widowhood, essentially, constitutes a social death and Uma Chakravarti outlines two modes of representing the social death of the widow—ideological and material. The first is ideological—in the sense that what was once held as precious by the husband is now turned into a potential threat to society. The widow's social death stems from her alienation from reproduction and sexuality following the loss of her husband, and her exclusion from a functional family dynamic in the prevailing social context with her only hope of reintegration being remarriage.[22] According to Chakravarti, the second mode of representing the social death of the widow is material: the figure of Nan Bowers represents the economic vulnerability of women who exist outside the nuclear family unit of two parents and their children. The character of Nan Bowers also exposes the lack of material supports by the State for widowed women. Although widowhood is a time of potential autonomy for women this autonomy is curtailed by the omnipresent threat of poverty exacerbated by legal and economic

19 Colm Tóibín, 'Unmoored by Grief', *The Independent*, 3 November 2014.

20 Úna Kealy, 'Teresa Deevy: A Quiet Subversive', in *Abbey Theatre Research Pack: Teresa Deevy: Katie Roche*, researched and compiled by Marie Kelly, School of Music and Theatre, University College Cork (Dublin: The Abbey Theatre, 2017), pp. 8–13 (p. 9).

21 Mary Gordon, 'Mary Lavin and Writing Women', *American Journal of Irish Studies*, 10 (2013), 114–129 (p. 117).

22 Uma Chakravarti, 'Gender and Caste: Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 (1995), 95–113.

practice disadvantaging widows. [23]

Charkravarti refers to 'the widow's institutionalised marginality, a liminal state between being physically alive and socially dead'.[24] When Nan Bowers is first introduced, she is a carefree young woman whose independence is viewed with disapproval by her neighbours in Kilbeggan. In particular, her refusal to grieve for Whelan when he moves to Dublin incites hostility:

> Nan: It won't break my heart to see him go.
>
> Bill: I think she'll console herself,—won't you, Nan,— with someone else.[25]

After her husband's death, Nan is, at first, an object of pity. However, the compassion with which Nan is treated by her neighbours inspires suspicion, it designates what Kundera refers to as 'an inferior, second-rate sentiment' that connotes a certain condescension towards the sufferer.[26] Nan attempts to move on from the role of widow and redefine herself as a woman, but her refusal to consider marrying again in Act Two disrupts the conservative morality of Deevy's play: 'I'd be long sorry. Once married is enough for me'.[27] Nan's lack of participation in the circulation of power further marginalises her socially, creating what Cathy Leeney refers to as 'a dramaturgy of alienation, of occluded realities [...] dealing with issues that were effectively sidelined in the social history of the nation too'.[28] Nan's greatest sin, it seems, is her 'ungovernable longing for a more expansive sense of selfhood'.[29]

There is a poignancy to Nan's social and material transformation in the play from the vibrant woman with 'bright hair, clear face,

23 John Feeney, 'Poverty in Ireland—Widows', *Magill*, 1 November 1969, https://magill.ie/archive/poverty-ireland-widows

24 Chakravarti, 'Gender and Caste', p. 95.

25 Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', p. 110.

26 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper, 1984), p. 51.

27 Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', p. 129.

28 Cathy Leeney, 'Teresa Deevy (1894–1963): Exile and Silence', in *Irish Women Playwrights 1900–1939: Gender and Violence on Stage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 161–193 (p. 163).

29 *Selected Plays of Irish Playwright Teresa Deevy, 1894–1963*, ed. by Eibhear Walshe (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 54.

carefree bearing' of Act One to the quiet woman of Act Two with 'a dark shawl covering her head and shoulders', the safeguard of female virtue, reflecting the narrow confinement of socially marginalised women's lives.[30] Nan is socially restricted by her widowed status, her lack of attachment is perceived as a threat and the only possibility of reintegration offered to her is remarriage. She is also materially restricted by her widowed status, forced into the humiliation of asking James Whelan, his attitude 'contemptuous', for any work available: 'I'd do anything, no matter what—sweeping or scrubbing'.[31] Nan, widowed only two years after she married, is still a young woman. Yet, the stage directions in Act Two note that she speaks 'quietly' to James and that '[h]er manner throughout is that of one past feeling very much—one whose life is over.'[32]

In *Wife to James Whelan*, Nan is obliged by circumstance to take up the mantle of widowhood and remake the rules for herself in light of her new identity. The inclusion of widowhood in *Wife to James Whelan* as part of Nan's narrative may be read as a concerted attempt by Deevy to dismantle theories of the family as they relate to specific Irish contexts. The historical moment that Deevy inhabited was a time when Article 41.2.1 of the Constitution (1937) clearly outlined women's place in the home:

> In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.[33]

As Morash notes, Deevy's critical stance is in sharp contrast to the official view of the role of women in the 1937 Constitution—a constitution that retains its original reductionist language and philosophy.[34] Article 41.2.2 further asserts that woman shall not be obliged to work outside the family home:

> The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.[35]

30 Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', p. 110 and p. 125.
31 Ibid., p. 128 and p. 129.
32 Ibid., p. 129.
33 Government of Ireland, *Constitution of Ireland*, January 2020, (Article 41.2.1).
34 Morash, 'Teresa Deevy: Between the Lines'.
35 Government of Ireland, *Constitution of Ireland* (Article 41.2.2).

Such a statement undermines the lived experience and social reality of widowed women with young children in early twentieth-century Ireland, women like Nan who worked out of economic necessity with little support from the State. In *Wife to James Whelan*, Deevy foregrounds the plight of a young widow whose circumstances 'revealed the emptiness of official rhetoric about mothers not being forced to work outside the home'.[36] John Feeney highlights the poverty of widows in the Irish state even after the introduction of the Widows' and Orphans' Pension Act in 1935:

> So it is then that young widows with children form a particularly salient example of hardship [...] the problem exists because of a political indifference that allows the machinery of assistance to clank past them [...]. The acute, if arbitrary and inconsistent standards used by officers to assess whether a person is justified in seeking assistance means that there are still considerable amounts of need still untouched by the distributive mechanics of welfare.[37]

Referring to some of the cases he encountered in his research, Feeney observed:

> The brutality of this system to old people and to mothers with young children is obvious. Because of its marginal political consequences however, this has not been electorally pursued with the vigour of more political1y [sic] profitable issues. No clothes, no shoes, no recreation [...]. It is really a very pathetic account of a grimly opposed and officially supported poverty.[38]

It is little wonder, given the punitive economic situation of a widowed woman in early twentieth-century Ireland, that Nan steals from James Whelan, a character symbolic of power and privilege, to feed her child and clothe herself when, as Kate observes, 'Sometimes she hadn't enough to eat'.[39] James's response, and insistence on Nan's arrest and sentence with hard labour despite her desperate circumstances, represents the patriarchal social structures of a society that resents and resists female autonomy, punishing those who challenge the limiting parameters of state and its systemic inequalities with confinement:

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36 Caoilfhionn Ni Bheacháin, 'Teresa Deevy and the Secrets of the Green Suitcase', *Irish Times*, 3 April 2021, p. 5.
37 John Feeney, 'Poverty in Ireland'.
38 Ibid.
39 Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', p. 136.

James: What term did you serve?

Nan: Six weeks was the sentence.

James: H'm…six weeks…with hard labour, I think.

Nan: Yes, with hard labour. It was you saw to it that I got so hard a term. (*Quietly*.)

James: And I did right.[40]

It seems James Whelan is right about one thing—the difference it makes to have power and money. In discussing the political power of women, the historian Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks suggested that a distinction should be made between 'power—the ability to shape political events—and authority—power which is formally recognized and legitimated', and women rarely had the latter.[41] In *Wife to James Whelan*, Deevy develops her thematic interest, previously outlined in *Katie Roche* in the way men gain and wield economic and, as a consequence, emotional and sexual control over women and explores the implications of what Anthony Roche terms 'inherited patriarchal structures' in her work.[42] If we consider the reference to the widow in *The Irish National Magazine* it is clear that widowhood in twentieth-century Ireland placed women in not only a liminal state, but a disempowered state, too:

> She is a widow, a poor old widow, and, oh! what a miserable struggle has she had with the world since the death of her husband, which happened many years ago. He was in a respectable way but left nothing behind him. While he lived all was well. They were comfortable—something more, though not affluent. But his death, which was sudden, brought a miserable change. That event at once rendered her nearly destitute.[43]

The widow of the story is a pitiful and pitied creature and representative of the economic and social instability that followed the transition to the liminal space of widowhood. As Mary Cullen observes, during the

40 Ibid., p. 143.
41 Merry E. Weisner-Hanks, *Gender in History* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2001), p. 246.
42 Teresa Deevy, 'Katie Roche', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, I, 57–102; Anthony Roche, 'Woman on the Threshold: J. M. Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche* and Marina Carr's *The Mai*', *Irish University Review*, 25.1 (1995), 143–162 (p. 155).
43 Le Messurier, 'The Widow', p. 12.

period 1830–1970 most Irish women who lived to late middle age or old age became widows and were vulnerable to poverty.[44] The 1835–1836 Poor Law Inquiry identified widows with young children as highly likely to be destitute because the remuneration for women's work would never support a family. Cullen suggests that the cause of widow's poverty lay in the lower earning power of women compared to men and women's economic dependence on men.[45] Likewise, in *Wife to James Whelan*, Deevy highlights the vulnerability of widowhood:

> James: I was sorry the old man left you nothing.
>
> Nan: He hadn't anything to leave. The pension died with him, you know.
>
> James: Three years a widow, and now you have nothing.[46]

Although Nan maintains her dignity and economic freedom throughout the play, the portrayal of her financial precarity bears pitiful testament to the official discourse surrounding the introduction of the limited Widows' and Orphans' Pensions Act of 1935, which described widows as 'deserving and helpless people' and precedes the political attention to the ideology of widowhood in the 1960's with the Succession Act of 1965.[47] It is interesting to observe how sharply the public discourse shifts from pity to judgement to derision. The play provides a critical and unremitting portrait of the refusal by society to allow Nan to move beyond the liminal space of widowhood and redefine and financially herself in her own right. Of all the liminal characters in Irish literature, it is widows who move closest to the possibility of transition to a post-liminal state, but in reality, there is no aggregation, just annihilation in what Edna O'Brien termed 'a land of strange, throttled, sacrificial

44 Mary Cullen, 'Widows in Ireland 1830–1970', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Volume V*, ed. by Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), pp. 609–618.

45 Ibid., p. 611.

46 Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', p. 128.

47 Mary Daly, *The Spirit of Earnest Inquiry* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1997), p. 37. When Charles Haughey, as Minister for Justice in 1965, introduced the Succession Act, he made provision to prevent spouses disinheriting their widowed partners or leaving them with only right of residence in the family house. The term 'Legal Right Share' was introduced within the 1965 Succession Act which was the first piece of Irish legislation to financially protect widowed people.

women', stifled by repressive Catholic values and idealised notions of womanhood in a public sphere that demanded domesticity and met independence with disdain.[48]

Michael Seidel observes that an exile is 'someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another' and this exilic mind is evident in the character of Nan who must reconcile herself to the loss of the life she had imagined and accept the social and psychological reality of the life imposed upon her, unwillingly, by her widowed status.[49] Nan reflects, as she sits in James's office: 'I am like a stranger in this place, although it is but six years since I was married'.[50] *Wife to James Whelan* is a play which conveys the ineffable pain of grief at the death of a husband, and the determinedly willed effort required to go on living and relating in a life beyond loss. In the play, Deevy offers an exploration of grief and the complicated structures that contain this traumatic transition. Cultural, political, and religious shifts have invariably shifted attitudes towards the concept of widowhood, and the ideological structure of widowhood embedded in Irish culture has been challenged and have changed. Deevy's texts explore and question the ideologies that placed Irish women in the 1930s in liminal spheres and scrutinise the values and axioms of the culture in which this occurred. From Annie Kinsella in *The King of Spain's Daughter* to Ellie Irwin in *A Disciple* (*In Search of Valour*), Deevy challenges prevailing contemporaneous social and cultural narratives relating to women who did not conform to the '[…] orthodoxies of respectable womanhood in 1930s Ireland'.[51] In *Wife to James Whelan*, Deevy explores a private world of unarticulated grief, a liminal world of becoming and unbecoming that is complicated for widows as a result of unavoidable social marginalisation and economic precarity. Theatre is a cultural construct and Deevy employs theatrical form to rewrite the narrative of widowhood, challenging the dominant ideology that misrepresented widowed women. *Wife to James Whelan*

48 Edna O'Brien, *A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974), p. 35.

49 Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 14.

50 Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', p. 126.

51 Teresa Deevy, 'The King of Spain's Daughter', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, 17–26; Teresa Deevy, 'In Search of Valour', *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, 3–13; Cullen, 'Widows in Ireland', p. 609; Ní Bheacháin, 'Sexuality, Marriage and Women', p. 79.

disrupts conservative patriarchal values and cultural narratives and, as such, functions as a disruptive force breaking fictions to reveal harsh realities but also new possibilities for Irish society. In sharing these narratives of widowhood, Deevy simultaneously dismantles the social construction of widowhood and weaves neglected narratives into the fabric of Irish culture, thus positioning theatrical space as a powerful instrument for social and political change.

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