

The Creation of Artists and Audiences in Morna Pearson's *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman* (2012)

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The Artist Man and the Mother Woman (2012), Morna Pearson's first full-length play set in her native Moray (Northeast Scotland),¹ is the grotesque portrait of the tortured relationship of Geoffrey, a middle-aged artist and teacher, and his troubled mother, Edie. The title already suggests conflicts of age and gender roles, but as Pearson's dark comedy gradually turns into a violent tale of horror, new semantic dimensions are revealed beneath the initial surface of light entertainment, among them the exploration of the nature of artistic creativity. *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman* analyses the sources of this creativity from the perspective of repressed sexuality: when one morning Geoffrey's pre-adolescent naivety is suddenly crushed by a magazine article, Edie is unable to abort his belated sexual awakening, and the powers this process unleashes result in impressive artistic creations. Pearson problematizes the simplistic binary oppositions (intellect/body, creativity/fertility) encoded in the title by representing liminal Geoffrey both as a creator and as a creation, who does not manage to escape the only reality he knows, entirely conjured up by his mother. As a result, the work combines the creation of art and the creation of the artist, and studies them as intertwined processes difficult to distinguish.

Pearson's blend of grotesque domestic naturalism and violent horror fits into the genre pattern of the Künstlerdrama, and responds to what Csilla Bertha calls "intriguing questions of (re)presentation and further layers of self-reflexivity" (28). Besides discussing the making of the artist and the function of his artworks on stage, the role of a third element of creative processes, the audience, is also addressed to reveal an audience immersion strategy, which can be related to a more general picture of artwork reception.

In her description of Künstlerdramas, Bertha explains that the works belonging to this genre naturally engage with

the thematization of essential questions and dilemmas of the existence of art and the artist, the nature of artistic creation, the relations between art and life, the subject and "objective" reality, the individual and the community, the differences between artistic and non-artistic value systems, and the role and function of the artist in the contemporary world. (27)

This model suggests that artist characters provide a fertile terrain for self-reflexivity and they normally inhabit a space with its own values other than, as Bertha puts it, “objective’ reality” (27). Indeed, in *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman*, protagonist Geoffrey initially occupies a space completely detached from normality, but his closed world has little to do with the “artistic . . . value systems” listed by Bertha (27). Instead, Geoffrey is just another piece in the reality conjured up by his mother, who powerfully imposes a totalitarian system on their home as a result of her extreme hostility to anything new, foreign, or of a sexual nature. In his review of the play for *The Guardian*, Mark Fisher also highlights this familiar yet unreal space when writing that

Edie has dealt with her fear of the outside world by sticking to a rigid routine. Meals are toast and jam, washing is in lavender bubble bath, bedtime is strictly 8pm. So far, she has kept Geoffrey under similar control . . . The strength and weakness of the piece is in its cartoonish distortion of reality. Pearson’s universe is compelling, yet at one remove from our own. (n. pag.)

In the early scenes—and the preceding fortyish years in Geoffrey’s life—Geoffrey lives without questioning anything in the way of life Edie imposed on him; her control over her house and her son are total. As a consequence, Edie’s role goes far beyond being the title’s Mother Woman with the functions of fertility and femininity assigned to it: being a single parent and the exclusive decision-maker in her son’s life, as a sculptor-like creator, she is undoubtedly closer to being the Artist Man than Geoffrey at the beginning of the play, and she is not willing to give this role up.

Every glimpse audiences catch of Geoffrey’s past underlines his mother’s inescapable dominance over him, and it is revealed that his becoming an artist was a decision Edie made (motivated by her Europhobia). Geoffrey relates: “Mither pulled me ooto French classes at school. She telt the heidmaster the language wid corrupt my innocence. I wis allowed tae dae mair art instead” (Pearson 32).² Geoffrey’s life, then, is restricted to learning to inhabit these highly limited spaces and functions selected for him by his mother. Whereas in teaching he never finds a vocation and is constantly bullied by colleagues and pupils as he admits: “Sometimes I wish they’d all catch fire and die” (5), his initial indifference to painting turns into passion and a form of escape.

It is scene 3’s grotesque moment of epiphany that unleashes the play’s main events, when Geoffrey shouts out, “Mither, apparently I’m sexy” (9), after finding both artist and teacher on a tabloid’s list of sexiest professions. Before this unexpected self-discovery, Edie has always successfully eradicated

everything that might have affected Geoffrey's pre-adolescent innocence, as the following passage also shows:

. . . he's nae so much as accidently brushed up against a wifie afore, and there's nae internet or dirty magazines in the hoose tae speak o. And I ken, I've checked under his mattress. Nut, nae contact wi anither female in the world. Oh. 'Cept his mammy o course. (36)³

The banal tabloid article, however, gradually manages to dismantle Edie's system since it makes Geoffrey start regarding himself as the title's Artist Man, thus breaking his infant-like union with his mother in search of a detached identity. This painful process of belated separation, which Geoffrey's first love interest, Clara, unsuccessfully tries to talk him through in scene 13, is the play's major source of dramatic tension, shifting character dynamics, and the violent brutality of the end scenes. The importance of this element is also highlighted by the work's title, a reference to a passage in George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1903), where the mother-artist relationship is described as follows:

. . . the artist's work is to shew us ourselves as we really are. Our minds are nothing but this knowledge of ourselves; and he who adds a jot to such knowledge creates new mind as surely as any woman creates new men. In the rage of that creation he is as ruthless as the woman, as dangerous to her as she to him, and as horribly fascinating. Of all human struggles there is none so treacherous and remorseless as the struggle between the artist man and the mother woman. Which shall use up the other? that is the issue between them. And it is all the deadlier because, in your romanticist cant, they love one another. (63)

This excerpt refers to both mother and artist as sources and creators, whose main activity (fertility/nutrition and creativity, respectively) is fuelled by the other who is consumed in it. In Shavian terms, then, the ability to dominate or even to annihilate is encoded in an artist's identity, so Pearson's "interest in power relations," underlined by Ben Fletcher-Watson, becomes central to the play and supports its reading as a *Künstlerdrama* (120).

As for power structures, Danièle Berton-Charrière suggests that the work's mother-son relationship allegorizes "unnatural unions leading to stifling and painful existences, domineering/dominated couples refiguring master/servant or slave duos," and it can be observed that dramatic tension escalates when Geoffrey stops accepting this "unnatural [union]," that is, his function to support Edie's mother role, and gradually detaches himself from

her (79). This detachment is enabled by the liberating space he creates for himself through art, and his creativity is stimulated by his encounters with women. First, audiences learn that Geoffrey paints still lifes in his garden shed and at school, using his mother's pot plants for inspiration, a stage that Pearson describes as "safe art of still lifes and portraits that require no self-exploration or -expression" (Personal Interview). After meeting his main love interest and object of obsession, his former student Evelyn, he starts painting a spider plant he sees "moving, creeping taowards it's [sic] prey" (Pearson 13). This metaphorical coming alive of a still life is an obvious reference to his own awakening, and the almost erotic language he uses to describe the picture denotes how femininity is being reinterpreted in his mind. The way he represents the spider plant indicates the emergence of new semantic layers in his understanding of women: his mother's protected, inert plant comes to denote seduction, desire, and sensuality. Pearson explains that at this stage art becomes a powerful tool for communication and self-expression for Geoffrey, who "had not been equipped with the language or social skills to explore these new feelings, so they were bound to manifest through his paint brush" (Personal Interview).

Geoffrey's next painting, inspired by Clara's vivid description of what love feels like, starts out as another still life but the color of the tomato "jist started leaking. Blood dripping ooto the vines, swirling intae a pool o scarlet and crimson" (Pearson 40). He ends up painting his own heart in love, and this discovery gives rise to new, more personal, and liberating themes. His dreams substitute the plants as inspiration for his work, foregrounding existence as a dark subject matter (birth, suicide, death) together with Evelyn, his obsession. His last work in the play is a triptych, which is the only set of paintings that actually appeared on stage in the 2012 Traverse Theatre production, painted by production designer Anthony Lambie (Pearson, Personal Interview). The third installment of the triptych, a magnified version of the first two parts, is described by Geoffrey to a furious Evelyn on their last encounter in the following:

My bloody, still, but slightly warm, heart. My heart held in my hand. My bloody hand that cut oot my ain heart. Holding it up for all—i.e. you—tae see. My bloody heart. Wi a word carved on it. That word being your name. Evelyn. (52)

Thus Geoffrey's climax as a painter in the play is an intimate and passionate self-portrait in three installments, the complex function of which—in line with Bertha's *Künstlerdrama*-definition—is to make "an immediate impact never

entirely expressible in words or action” (28). Geoffrey’s representation of his body as incomplete and the offering of his heart to Evelyn raise the question whether the protagonist is simply substituting his mother for another woman, a younger and more attractive one, as Shaw puts it, in order to “use [it] up.” (63) His obsession with Evelyn is so deep that not even a restraining order can keep him away from her. However, the shocking outcome of the play, Evelyn’s brutal murder by Edie, aborts all positive processes in Geoffrey’s life, and the end scenes mirror the beginning in an inverted way: mentally destabilized Edie loses agency, and her son, accused of the murder by the whole town, is trapped at home, looking after his mother. Suddenly, the growing space of personal freedom he created through painting disappears, and through a seismic semantic shift, freedom becomes guilt and a secret threat as Geoffrey decides to give up on his life to be able to hide his mother, an insane, dangerous murderer.

Beyond the artwork-artist relationship, Pearson examines another dimension relevant to the genre of the *Künstlerdrama*, that of the role of the audience in the reception of the arts. Trish Reid describes the language of the play as “dark, skewed poetry rooted in the Doric dialect” (xiv), and as Ian Brown explains, Doric is often misinterpreted as “a sub-dialect of a particular deprived class” together with other varieties of Scots, so the playwright’s language choice is an empowering experiment for its artistic use (61). For an Edinburgh venue’s audience (where it premiered in 2012), however, its status as a strongly non-local and rarely staged variety of a national language enables it to perform complex functions. Besides providing a sense of place and class, Doric creates and reinforces strong bonds between characters, while it excludes Clara, whose Standard English immediately reveals that she is “nae fae roond here” and is unable to fit in (21). At the same time, it also creates some distance with audiences since they are constantly reminded that geographically what is seen on stage is happening somewhere else; namely, the north-eastern coast of Scotland.

However, the powerful universe of Doric idioms and expressions mostly serves comic purposes and the initial, apparent surface of light comedy creates a playful way to immerse audiences until the shocking truth of Evelyn’s murder is discovered. In her review of the play for *The Scotsman*, Joyce McMillan writes that “Pearson finally turns the tables on us with a savage reminder that what we are laughing at here is the stunting and destruction of human lives, in ways that can provoke a terrifying reaction” (n. pag.). What McMillan highlights is the resourceful introduction of the question of guilt into the plot and the way Pearson makes audience members unexpectedly face their share of it for having laughed and clapped along Geoffrey’s and Evelyn’s

painful and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to become fully functional adults, leaving both characters in a tragic state. This way, the comic twists and the strategic use of Doric successfully divert attention from violence and oppression, which are omnipresent in the play from the first scenes on.

This audience immersion strategy is not unique to *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman* in Pearson's oeuvre. When discussing her earlier one-act play *Distracted* (2006), Philip Howard identifies the same method when arguing that the playwright's major achievement is "to tell a story of such intense pain and loss, but in such an unflaggingly hilarious way, that we don't notice the hurt until it's too late" (xiv). Other works in Scotland's recent theatre trajectory, such as Anthony Neilson's 2004 *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* and Rob Drummond's 2013 *Quiz Show*, also start out as light comedies doing their best to entertain their audiences until a semantic layer is suddenly removed to reveal a shocking truth behind the laughs—mental illness and child abuse, respectively. In her analysis of *Quiz Show*, Jeanne Schaaf observes that the underlying dynamics at stake in such a play can be identified as "the idea of shared experience and of exchange between stage and audience" (21), hence the emphasis on the pronoun *we* in the last scene. Pearson also highlights it as the work's last pronoun when Geoffrey's offer of "Let's run you a bath shall we?" (59) resonates as an invitation for a ritual cleansing ceremony for characters and audiences alike. At the same time, the angry offstage mob around Geoffrey's house screaming his name (instead of Edie's) can be regarded as the mirror image of the theatre's audience, who constitute the Other that know the truth. As a result, this immersive strategy also argues for a more active form of spectatorship since it places as much emphasis on the audience as on the artist and the artwork, and self-exploration and self-reflection are highlighted on both ends—production and reception.

In conclusion, the analysis of *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman* as a Künstlerdrama in Bertha's terms reveals how through Geoffrey's character Pearson represents artistic creation as an activity with a strong intra- and interpersonal dimension. In his process of self-exploration, Geoffrey uses painting to create a space of freedom, a new reality detached from his mother and the way of life she has forced on him. In his belated search for an independent adult self, Geoffrey has to learn about his body and his sexuality, and this exploration becomes a main source of inspiration for his works. The way his pot plants in his initial still lifes come to life to give way to a haunting, almost surreal subject matter fuelled by dreams and desire is symbolic to his own personal development until the violent end of the play aborts all of his aspirations. As for the interpersonal dimension, Pearson skillfully uses comedy to immerse the audience in order to turn them into passive

accomplices of what happens on stage, ending in the destruction of the characters' lives. In more general terms, this can be read as a case for a more active and more responsible attitude in the reception of the arts.

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Notes

¹ Pearson, originally from Elgin (a town in Moray district, Northeast Scotland), started her playwriting career at the Young Writers' Group of the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, one of Scotland's most prestigious venues and most successful incubators of new writing. Her one-act play *Distracted* (2006), which premiered as part of a triple bill and won the Meyer-Whitworth Award, was followed by short works for BBC Radio and Óran Mór's *A Play, a Pie & a Pint*-series of lunchtime theatre in Glasgow. *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman* premiered at the Traverse in 2012, directed by the theatre's artistic director, Orla O'Loughlin. Pearson's latest play, *How to Disappear*, premiered at the Traverse in December 2017.

² Mother pulled me out of French classes at school. She told the headmaster the language would corrupt my innocence. I was allowed to do more art instead.

³ He has not even accidentally brushed up against a woman before, and there is no internet or dirty magazines in the house to speak of. And I know, I've checked under his mattress. No, no contact with another female in the world. Oh. Except his mummy, of course.

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