

Motherhood, Vulnerability and Resistance in *The Elysium Testament* by Mary O'Donnell

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Abstract: Mary O'Donnell's novel *The Elysium Testament* (1999) narrates the story of Nina, an accomplished grotto restorer, but a neglectful wife and mother according to the Irish patriarchal symbolic order –the "register of regulatory ideality" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 18). Estranged from her husband, Neil, she sends him a series of letters, her "testament," where some of the most significant aspects of her life are exposed. Readers discover that Nina's and Neil's marriage begins to crumble after the birth of their second child, Roland, to whom Nina attributes a frightening dual nature, which she tries to control through physical and psychological punishment. When Roland accidentally perishes in the grotto Nina has been restoring, the ensuing guilt she experiences sends her into a profound state of depression. A psychiatrist helps her begin a cathartic, healing and redeeming process by which she may experience an inner revolution and a symbolic rebirthing. This study explores how Nina's vulnerability as a mother and wife in distress is projected onto her son, Roland, whose abnormal behavior forms an element of unaddressed psychic disturbance in her own life. This work also examines the psychoanalytic dimensions of the strategies she implements to resist the hegemonic discourse and social practices in favor of domesticity, marriage and motherhood in Ireland. Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach towards the maternal and Judith Butler's, Zeynep Gambetti's and Leticia Sabsay's views on vulnerability and resistance are employed to analyze the topic.

Maria Elena JAIME DE PABLOS

Motherhood, Vulnerability and Resistance in *The Elysium Testament* by Mary O'Donnell

The poet, novelist, short story author Mary O'Donnell, "one of Ireland's most interesting and gifted writers" according to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (vii), published her "complex, accomplished and critically acclaimed" (Walshe 79) novel, *The Elysium Testament*, in 1999. This novel is a piece of narrative in which gothic devices and mystic qualities are combined to produce "a savage exploration of the primal forces of transgression, fear and death" (Kremin, qtd. in Walshe 79).

Her past haunts her to the point of torture and she prefers death to living such a miserable life: "As I no longer have the capacity to halt this flow of memory, I've decided to die" (O'Donnell 25). However, before she puts an end to her life, she needs her husband and daughter to understand her reasons for acting as she did. For Eibhear Walshe, the novel, narrated in first-person, is "an extended suicide note" (80), and he adds: "Her testament is an attempt to understand the tragic accident that led to the death of her son. This is her lament, her song of Roland, but it is also her fictive attempt to come to terms with her own abuse of her son and her fear of his strange nature" (80).

Kristeva says that it is obvious that childbirth involves mental and physical suffering, that motherhood implies self-denial in making *oneself anonymous* in order to transmit social norms. She is thus able to turn nature into culture, by establishing a relationship between the semiotic (nature) and the symbolic (culture). But motherhood compensates women for this sort of masochism. By becoming mothers, women experience love and achieve completeness: "the arrival of the child gives her a chance, albeit not a certainty, of access to the other", to the ethical encounter with the other (Kristeva, "Stabat," 115). Thus mother and child are related to each other by the bond of love. A mother not only gives life but also love.

Kristeva tends to idealize the nurturing and caring qualities of the pre-oedipal state and emphasize the significance of the early mother-infant bond for the healthy development of the child's subjectivity (Mercer 246): thinking, creativity, capacity for symbolization, ability to relate to others, etc. The infant body becomes a mimetic pattern of the maternal body—matrix—and opens onto the symbolic by "assimilation, repetition, and reproduction of words" (Reineke 53-54).

Mary O'Donnell, however, describes a maternal experience which Kristeva does not account for. Nina does not want to have an unplanned and unwanted second child and intends to have an abortion. However, she finally decides to go forward with her pregnancy for Neil's sake. She does not idealize motherhood. Quite the opposite is true: she considers giving birth an act of violence and pain (O'Donnell 32), which may lead to death—Nina nearly dies at labor (31)—and motherhood an alienating phenomenon. She describes the mother's life as "sick and weak and at the mercy of other people" (58), and her children as a "cage" (31). This would be in tune with Luce Irigaray's assertion that motherhood implies a transformation "process of moving from independence to interdependence, unity to fluidity" (qtd. in Baraitser 52) or with Kristeva's assertion that "the transition to motherhood entails a certain horror, disintegration, the birth of a state of being excessive to unity" (qtd. in Baraitser 53). The maternal is thus understood as metaphor for the split subject itself (subject and the other).

The ethical encounter with the other that motherhood represents, according to Kristeva, does not take place between Nina and Roland as she considers him "an alien in earnest" and perceives "a gap between [...her] life and his" (O'Donnell 58). That Nina undergoes an experience of confrontation with his—for her, intolerable—son is explicitly stated in the passage in which she confesses that: "Everything in [...her] resisted Roland" (54).

Roland represents an intrusion of the other into an ideal liberal and secular family community constituted by Neil, Nina and their first sibling, Elinore. They constitute a homogeneous family group who seem to relate to each other in a fairly harmonious way. Nina tries, using Zeynep Gambetti's words, to exclude, subjugate and humiliate (30) Roland for being dissimilar and therefore alien, abject, a destabilizing element. His nature—strange, uncanny, sometimes mystic, sometimes evil—is Nina's source of frustration, anxiety, distress and fear. To explain Roland's behavior, from a medical point of view, readers of the novel are told that he suffers from a neurological problem which makes him see a doppelgänger, a presence identical in appearance but opposite in character: Roland stands for good, his doppelgänger stands for evil. In this respect, an early note in the novel introduces Roland's disorder: "NOTE. The experience of seeing a doppelgänger is termed heautoscopy and seems to be closely linked with epilepsy of the temporal lobe kind" (O'Donnell 6).

Roland is visited by his doppelgänger at night. He fears this "other Roland," his diabolical other self, which in perpetual conflict with him, a five-year-old boy who, in contrast to such presence, displays

saintly attributes—religious devotion, obedience, tolerance to suffering and superpowers. But then, he can, for instance, levitate. In the following quotation, Nina responds with terror when she observes Roland levitate in the fashion of a medieval mystic in union with God. His "radiant joy" seems to emphasize the fact that he is experiencing an ecstatic vision which fills him with pure bliss:

The room was filled with ivory light and the child was suspended above the two miniature altars, arms out stretched, his face radiant with joy and perspiration. At the sight of him, a sickness rose up in my gorge. [...] Before I could call his name again, I gagged, my eyes shut tight with the effort of restraint, yet unable to control my stomach as it heaved an acidic mess out into this room. The air curdled. When I opened my eyes, I was on my knees, gasping. Roland stood beside me.

'Mama!' he whispered, his eyes gentle with concern.

One part of me wanted to hang onto him, to lean against him, and for a moment I imagined his small frame could carry me. But again, my need for him was transformed into something else. My face was hot, yet the perspiration which broke on my brow and upper lip seemed chilly. The heat of anger rose through my body, the surge of blood to my head. As I knelt, level with him, I could see my reflection in the mirror and recognized that rage.

'What were you at?' I hissed, catching him by both arms and holding tight.

'Mama!'

'What were you doing? *What were you doing?*'

Then I began to shake him. I shook him and shook him, and he did not cry out. He tried to control the movement of his head as I kept shaking and pinching, in a blind attempt to kill the thing in him that provoked me at every turn. Finally, he went limp in my arms.

'Jesus,' I whispered, holding him to me. 'Oh Jesus.' (O'Donnell 158)

The last sentence in the above quotation may lead the reader to think that Nina is falling prey to an unconscious drive that is beyond her control, which leads her to horrible violent actions, although in a nonintentional, and pre-reflexive way. As Walshe indicates: "O'Donnell introduces the reader to a nightmare of monstrous gothic motherhood underpinned by fear of [...] what increasingly appears to be evidence of the saintly paranormal" (91-92). She, Walshe adds, embodies "society's profound fear of the irrational and the mystical" (80), taboo topics that she prefers not to discuss. No wonder, then, that Nina writes: "I told nobody. Neither you, nor Ciaran, nor any woman. I couldn't trust anybody with what I'd seen, not once, or twice, but on a number of different occasions in the four months before he died. Roland could fly" (O'Donnell 110).

This overwhelming fear is the source of her uncontrolled violence against Roland all along his five years of existence. She inflicts violent pain on Roland with one purpose: to suppress that which makes Roland an abject being, an alien person or a source of disturbance, of chaos, of fear; and to teach him "to put [...] his feet on the ground and to keep them there" (O'Donnell 111).

The protagonist of *The Elysium Testament* is, in O'Donnell's words, a character that "deface[s] the world", an "angry" and "destructive", "child-beater, who, if witnessed, would bring social services rushing to intervene" (qtd. in Fogarty 162). Violence, misunderstanding and love constitute her response to Roland's abnormal behavior. Undermining the fantasy of maternal love, when nobody is around, Nina not only lacerates Roland's psyche with insults, but also inflicts pain on his body by slapping and pinching it (O'Donnell 169). These punitive strategies indicate not only that Nina disapproves of her son's actions but also that she is ready to force him into a conventional child role. Disapproval and punishment have a most devastating effect on the victim. Roland's infant psyche gets saturated with negativity. Roland's childish illusion of being bonded to his mother is, this way, frustrated. He soon notices that Nina does not respond to his needs: company, respect and love; and that he cannot meet his mother's expectations of "normality."

According to Kristeva, violence is intrinsic to the subject and emanates from the operation of the semiotic drives—the unconscious, specifically the death drive (Schippers 103) which is associated to a deep state of melancholia. Nina also points out sadness as the source of her violent actions: "Sadness invites evil into our hearts" (O'Donnell 163). This implies that it is high internal distress, rather than Roland's strange behavior, that motivate her abuse of the child, which would make this violence an expression of her inner turmoil than a need to regulate the son's conduct.

Violence is mostly applied in contexts of conflict, where it may be "the organism's 'defenses' against the danger of aggressivity" (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 152) on the part of "the other." Kristeva adds that although violence is prior to any conception of gender or sexual difference, the symbolic order promotes the prejudice that violence is masculine and, by extension, that the feminine becomes antithetical to violence" (Schippers 104). However, feminine violence may mirror masculine violence (107). This is the case of Nina in *The Elysium Testament*, a woman in conflict with herself and

others, who is unable to relate to herself and others without resorting to violence, and who attacks her son—a psychological defense mechanism—because he, in her imagination, represents some kind of danger to her emotional stability.

Roland's separation from Nina constitutes a wound to the child's fantasy of oneness with an idealized maternal figure, a wound that makes him unhappy and vulnerable. Unfortunately, Roland cannot repair such a wound by transference of identification to the idealized imaginary father (Mercer 250), a positive figure of affection, because Neil is also an absent parent.

Neil stands for the symbolic father, who identifies himself with the law. Kristeva distinguishes two types of fathers. The symbolic, Oedipal, father and the imaginary father. They differ in "temperament" or substance. Kristeva identifies the imaginary father as the "loving" father, who stands in contrast to the judging stern oedipal father associated with the harsh and punitive superego (Mercer 248). Ciaran, Nina's lover, who "understood Roland on a level that mattered. Perhaps it was easier for him" as he also suffers from epilepsy, plays the role of the imaginary father for Roland. Whereas Neil stands for the symbolic father, he does not comfort Roland (O'Donnell 102).

Neil fails as a father and as a husband. The patriarch of the house, Nina blames him for leaving most of the rearing of their children and domestic chores to her, to Elinore, their daughter, and to Bernie, the cleaner (207). She also blames him for stating his superiority over her: "You're so superior. Morally superior. You always were, always thought you were! You even believed your body to be better, fitter" (206). She calls her husband a "vampire" (46) as he takes advantage of those close to him for his own benefit as they assume his responsibilities as theirs. No doubt, Nina resists the patriarchal hegemonic discourse based on gender discrimination and social practices in favor of domesticity, marriage and motherhood in Ireland.

Elinore blames both Nina and Neil for their family's dysfunctionality, regarding them as selfish and neglectful parents, who "are always talking about their own things. It's all work, work, work, and art, art, art and of course sex, sex, sex" (205). Their incompetence at resolving family problems, such as Roland's behavior or marital infidelity on the part of both spouses, is obvious, and when they do try to handle them, they exchange violent words to show that they deeply disagree on how to tackle them. High level of stress, marital discord, lack of family cohesion, lack of contentment, and violent acts and words by Nina and Neil make life unpleasant, if not unbearable, for Elinore and Roland, the most vulnerable members of this fractured family.

Obsessions, contradictions and fears relating his son undermine Nina's psyche: "I can't escape the tyranny of memory. No matter [...] how wonderful my work in the restoration of the Elysian Grotto – my mind will insist [...] on returning to our son; our brave warrior, our little Cuchullain" (12). A little boy who keeps on resisting torment inflicted upon her by her own mother and by her doppelgänger.

When reflecting upon Roland and her relationship with him, something makes Nina revisit her own childhood. Memories of the past, "Things about Dad" (17), "Daddykins" (18), start haunting her. She reflects upon her father, a man who was obsessed with the idea of making Nina and her brother, Hugon, "world-class swimmers"; a father who took his children to the point of physical exhaustion and psychological humiliation to achieve his goal, "a bullying, old bastard" who forced them to inhabit an "occult world" (163); a dual character, like herself or Roland, who had her "loving him and hating him at the same time all through his life" (74). Yet, as her mother dies when she is only six, he remains the only model of parenthood she has had—masculine, competitive and unaffectionate. We see how Nina misses her mother as a figure of affection when she is seen to imagine herself in her company as a child.

Nina's psychotic state leads her to a primal regression:

Such an excursion to the limits of primal regression can be phantasmatically experienced as the reunion of a woman-mother with the body of her mother. The body of her mother is always the same Master-Mother of instinctual drive, a ruler over psychosis, a subject of biology, but also, one toward which women aspire all the more passionately simply because it lacks a penis: that body cannot penetrate her as can a man when possessing his wife. (Kristeva, "Motherhood" 239)

She also discovers then that she was a victim of abuse and neglect, both physical and emotional, during childhood, and that she was also a wounded child. Unhealed herself, she remains, in her late thirties, a split subject who needs to confront his own abjection and come to terms with her own otherness in order to understand what is represented by her father and son. Only when she is aware of the internal antagonism she experienced as a girl—she both loved and hated her father—and still undergoes as a woman—she both loves and fears her on, can she look for the strategies to handle it.

Fearing her son (O'Donnell 132), Nina detaches herself from Roland as much as possible by working at The Elysian Grotto, which she considers her "dream project." As Walshe states: "this primitive place of art, so carefully created by Nina [...] an escape from her tortured sense of herself as a violent mother" (91). Nina avoids meeting Roland, and therefore the responsibilities associated with motherhood, by working long hours at the grotto. The latter is for her "an ideal world" (O'Donnell 103) in which she can play with both nature [earth] and culture [art], and in which she can achieve completeness by connecting her body with her soul as the grotto is both a place of physical work and a place of retreat. In this place problems, other than strictly professional, are set aside: "I was like an addict. Obsessed, a victim of my compulsions. I had to have the 'feelgood factor' that came from restoration work" (55).

According to Judith Butler, vulnerability is overcome through acts of resistance ("Rethinking Vulnerability" 12) and "negated when it is converted into agency" (23). Following this line of thought, Nina's vulnerability, whose cause is the threat to the unity and stability that Roland/motherhood represents, would be overcome by hard work at the grotto: "I managed to avoid him. [...] I fled to the Elysian Grotto for consolation, took my panic out in an agitation of crystals, a haze of scallops and conches, Spanish purples, giant clams and ear shells. *Tectus nilaticus*, *Conus virgo*, *Conus leopardatus*" (O'Donnell 110).

Only when the grotto—designed to become a nymphaeum (75), a space consecrating femininity and therefore full of signs of fertility—is finished, the ethical encounter between mother and son takes place: "it was as if I'd found my son at last. Our separateness had been dissolved. No passion could surpass what I now felt for him. He returned it, as if I had never struck him. As if I had never harmed his body. He trusted me, exclusively" (189). She is then convinced that she has already "vanquish[ed] the enemy," inside her, who pushed her into violent acts.

By then, she has discovered that, like Lady Macbeth, she had been hearing her own nature and unmapped appetites (97), that she had been trying to fool herself by pretending that it was somebody else's "nature which gave her cause for concern, when in fact it was her own" (97), that she had been rejecting Roland, because he represents that that she hates in her nature, two-ness, something she has been trying to bury in her unconsciousness: "Only Roland reminded me of what I used to see as a child, in that awful pool where I discovered and then rejected myself. And that's what I couldn't stand. I hated what he reawakened in me" (125), and that she had been emulating her own father, controlling, manipulating and abusing her child: "I am, in some respects, my father's daughter. I could not let Roland be, as Dad could not be gentle enough with me" (110).

Nina's has just discovered that, a mother and wife in distress, she has projected her vulnerability onto her son, whose strange behavior, as Giovanna Tallone states, she could neither understand nor accept it (145). This way, using Judith Butler's, Zeynep Gambetti's and Leticia Sabsay's words, it seems that she has been generating the impression of being "fully divested of vulnerability, having expelled it externally onto the other," Roland (4).

Although, the ethical encounter Nina-Roland, mother-son, eventually takes place, it is unfortunately very brief. When Roland visits the just completed Elysian Grotto with his mother, a piece of rock formation splits off the ceiling and falls, smashing Roland's small body. He dies. Roland is "a lamb on the floor of a sacred place of dying" (O'Donnell 195). His sacrifice is symbolic. It represents the structural violence which seems to inhabit Irish households for centuries.

The grotto is a symbolic image for Nina's womb, as the following quotation indicates: "[Roland] hadn't forgotten that brutal, muscular and final ejection from the interior grotto, where he had floated, drifted, turned and prodded for forty weeks" (59) is also a tomb for little Roland, which is anticipated by Nina calling the grotto the 'place of the blessed dead' (21) early in the novel. Life and death intertwine as art and motherhood are juxtaposed in the narrative pattern of the novel (Walshe, "Dark Spaces" 146).

The child is an example of resistance to parental violence and negligence up to the moment of his death. He asserts his right to be protected, supported and loved even minutes before he dies, when he calls her mother's attention after feeling the presence of his frightening alter ego. For him, as for Leticia Sabsay "resistance is a never-ending struggle" (290). Nina, however, ignores her son's last demand of attention because she is busy examining a crack in her masterpiece. Once more, in her pursuit of artistic excellence, she forgets about her responsibilities as a mother, in this occasion, this has lethal consequences.

Nina's abusive and neglectful behavior towards Roland has not only wrecked her son's life, but also her daughter's, who even accuses her of having "fucked her up and ruined her life" (O'Donnell 20). Unable to talk about the taboo of domestic violence with her parents or anyone else, she keeps silent,

but does her best to protect her brother and care for him. She ends up becoming a mother-substitute for her brother as she assumes the responsibilities traditionally associated to motherhood.

The only strategy she can think of as a means to liberate her fear, anger and stress, to reveal how his brother's body is violently acted on by his own mother and to express her refusal to accept or comply with this abuse is writing anonymous letters to Sylvia, a newspaper columnist who gives advice to people in trouble:

Dear Sylvia,

There is something wrong at home. I think my Mum and Dad hate one another. The rows happen at night, after my little brother has gone to bed. Sometimes, they happen in the middle of the night. [...] they keep on and on about my brother. And they don't listen to me. [...] I feel sorry for my brother and so I stay around the house more than I have to. He has an imaginary friend that he tells me about. We even speak in our own secret language. But I think he is unhappy and afraid. I have seen small marks on his skin, around his arms and legs and shoulders. He also gets bruised quite easily. Sometimes Mum and Dad don't see him at all. [...] I keep him clean. Sometimes his body hurts when I'm drying him with the towel. I'd like to tell her [housecleaner], but then I don't know if she would believe me. Then I hear things in the middle of the night, but I'm too scared to get out of bed to see what it is. I don't know what's going on. Sometimes I think I'm going mad. Can you help me please? (O'Donnell, *Elysium Testament* 54)

However, her letters—a mode of solidarity towards Roland, but also an act of resistance against her mother's unjust and abusive power—are never posted. That is because Elinore, like Nina in relation to her father, experiences an ambivalent feeling in relation to her mother—she both loves and hates her. For Elinore, Nina is both a figure of affection—when relating to her—and a perpetrator of abuse—when relating to Roland: "I know my mother is a good person. [...] But] Mum is hurting my little brother" (129). As we can see, Mary O'Donnell explores the duality of human nature through the phenomenon of the *doppelgänger* not only through Roland, but also through Nina, who may, like Roland, incarnate both good and evil and, therefore, react differently to different people.

As a witness to abuse who is unable to carry out any effective action that could put an end to it, "The question of guilt arises in [...Elinore's] head" (O'Donnell, qtd. in Fogarty 159). It becomes unbearable once the victim, Roland, dies. So, when this eventually happens, she abandons the family home together with her father to avoid contact with the perpetrator, who equally develops a strong sense of guilt: "May some merciful God forgive me, for I cannot forgive myself" (O'Donnell 10). Her sign of repentance are evident:

What I'd give to go back! What I'd give to be wiser, more patient and attentive! There he was, my truest love, and only then did I see him as he was. He should have had unicorns with pearly horns as pets, he should have been raised by knightly father and an honourable mother. A Lancelot Dulac, and a Guinevere, who in their way understood the concepts of honour. Respect and gentleness. A safe haven for the dreams of split and compromised selves. (O'Donnell 185)

With Roland dead, and Elinore and Neil living apart, Nina falls into an abyss of melancholia. She finds herself unable to connect drive energy with meaning as life has no purpose and words have no sense. This collapse of meaning is indicated when she writes: "words mean [...] nothing. [...] They cannot reach me. My soul has slipped beyond a casement the far side of language" (199). This involves, according to Kristeva, "the dissolution of the subject as signifying subject" ("Subject in Process" 134), the death of psychic life.

She resorts to writing, a signifying process, to overcome her sense of emptiness, desolation and remorse that accompany her experiencing of disintegration. Although she has already decided to put an end to her life because she is unable to halt the flow of memory, Nina does not want to die before explaining the reasons leading her to commit suicide in a series of letters addressed to Neil. Originally, an "appendix to [her] life", these letters, are meant to make Neil "understand why living no longer enchants [...her]" (O'Donnell 21). But they end up having an unexpected cathartic effect, as they contribute to Nina's psychological stabilization. No wonder then, that she refers to "the healing work of writing" (86). Writing, using Kristeva's words, proves to be "crucially, an emotional holding operation against the disruptive subjective impact of lost loves, repressed pasts, displaced selves (qtd. In Elliott 130).

Her letters are pieces of narrative in which, using Kristeva's words "the imaginary and the real, the inner world and the external one" (qtd. in Elliott 132) meet to help her achieve some personal unity; some psychological autonomy, some transformation of psychic identification and affective bonds (133).

They are, like Elinore's, acts of resistance to overcome vulnerability stemming from fear, insecurity, guilt and despair.

In order to overcome her state of melancholia, Nina needs to discover its source by shedding light upon "The dark spaces of [...her] history" (O'Donnell 77), the ones inhabited by the ghosts of the past that haunt her. Her psychiatrist friend, John Holme helps her begin a cathartic, healing and redeeming process by which she ends up experiencing an inner revolution and a symbolic rebirthing.

John Holmes becomes her imaginary father, "who does not judge but hears [... her] truth in the availability of love" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 205). Nina trusts him as a "curer of despair" (O'Donnell 37) because he can understand the source of it: two-ness (221). Kristeva states that "there is a parallel between the imaginary father and god" (qtd. in Mercer 254). Thus John Holmes, imaginary father, would play the role of a god. This association is explicitly stated: "I am expected to be bloody God, or at least to provide numinous experiences for anyone who wants to use me!" (O'Donnell 170).

Thanks to him, who resorts to transference discourse and transference love, Nina learns to live with the past, to recognize the presence of the other within her, to forgive and love herself, to establish satisfactory relationships not only with others, but also, and most importantly with herself. She acquires a new, subjective and intersubjective mental configuration which reactivates her capacity for signification. As Kristeva indicates, it is through forgiveness and sublimation that we establish a more constructive relationship with violence, and a less violent relationship with the other" (qtd. in Schippers 108):

The Nina of the past: "this Nina is not me at all, but somebody else" (O'Donnell, *Elysium Testament* 10),
Now I am ready.
I own no shame.
I have undressed my fear. (O'Donnell, *Elysium Testament* 210)

Accompanied by John, she carries out a final act of purification. Both, naked, immerse three times in the river Liffey in order to be "reborn. In Nina's words: The river "washing me, cleansing me. I vanquished my enemies. I vanquished my one enemy. Not Roland, not my son the saint. But his pain, and all pain which is the incarnation of evil. [...] We would move to defy all darkness of spirit" (214).

With John's help, she is able to begin anew, using Butler's words, embracing vulnerability, getting in touch with her feelings, or baring her fault-lines "as if that might launch a new mode of authenticity or inaugurate a new order of moral values or a sudden and widespread outbreak of "care"" (Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability" 25). Her sense of rebirth is clearly stated at the end of the novel: "THE BEGINNING." These two words written in capital letters, says Mary O'Donnell, are deliberately employed on purpose "to convey [...her] sense that Nina, [...her] protagonist, will go on, despite what she has endured through the death of her young son" (qtd. in Fogarty 164).

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