

Island Girl, Universal Woman: *Peig: A Scéal Féin* (1998) as Narrative of Class, Labour and Femininity

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This article reappraises the Irish-language autobiography, *Peig*, as a unique account of the experience of life and work by a woman of the rural Irish speaking subsistence class. *Peig* is a seminal Irish language text, both as a depiction of class and gender-based conflict, and as an Irish language work that describes intersectional issues of justice, labour, rights and femininity from childhood to old age. I examine the narrative through the lenses of home, poverty, housing, work, marriage, children, friends, foes and loss. *Peig* depicts great resilience in the face of structural inequalities and localised injustice. The sustaining nature of intergenerational female friendships plays the central role in *Peig*'s account of her life. Arguing that the text belongs to the shared histories of women across the world, from China to the Middle East and Africa, I conclude that *Peig* is one of the most emotionally rich books in modern Irish. The article opens new ground in examining the question of class in Irish language literature, concluding that its universal themes continue to resonate in a contemporary multi-ethnic Ireland.



In this article, I examine the Irish-language autobiography, *Peig*, as a unique and reflective account of the universal challenges faced by a woman from the rural poor in the late 19th century, living on the Blasket Islands, a small group of islands off the southwest Irish coast. Described by writer and translator Bryan MacMahon as a ‘moving’ autobiography (Sayers, 1974: 7), critical studies of *Peig* have focused predominantly on the renowned storyteller Peig Sayers (1873–1958) in the context of the Irish language oral tradition and the Great Blasket Island autobiographies. I contend that social hierarchies, status and class in Irish-language literature remain under-examined topics, particularly with regard to such a canonical work of Irish-language literature as *Peig*. This article addresses that gap and looks at Peig’s reflections on social issues and the language that she uses to describe their impact on her. Edward Hirsch notes how an idea of ‘the peasant’ was advanced, as far back as the writers of the Irish Revival period of the early 20th century, ‘as a romantic emblem of a deep, cultural, pastoral, and significantly anti-commercial (or nonmaterialistic) Irish life’ (1991: 1122). While acknowledging the central importance of the oral tradition to the transmission of *Peig*, this article attends to her philosophical responses to social and material challenges from childhood to old age. Taking as starting points both Robin Flower’s observation that Peig’s spoken Irish had ‘the effect of literature’ and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin’s description of Peig as a ‘fealsamh’ [a philosopher], I demonstrate how narrative devices in *Peig* address certain universal social issues and philosophical concerns (1944: 49; 2001: 4). Through an examination of the language used in *Peig* to describe poverty, work, marriage, motherhood, relationships, housing and justice, I argue that the autobiography is both local and universal in two distinct ways. First, although local in origin and description, the issues that arise in *Peig* carry universal relevance, particularly for women. At the time of publication, and to this day, themes in *Peig* have global relevance by virtue of many of the issues that Peig highlights in her autobiography that affect many women globally, at different stages of their lives and in widely different circumstances. I illustrate how *Peig*’s emotional response to the hardships she faced and the language that she uses in conveying this response reveal a deep philosophical understanding of life, coupled with extraordinary resilience. The article thus concludes that, while Peig’s reflections on life’s challenges are unique to her and situated locally, the material and social hardships that she faced and the emotions that she eloquently describes in her responses carry universal appeal.

Peig Sayers was born in 1873 in Baile an Bhiocáire [Vicarstown] in the parish of Dún Chaoin [Dunquin] in an Irish speaking, or *Gaeltacht*, area of Kerry into a family of ‘subsistence farmers’ (Coughlan, 2007: 1). She entered service as a domestic servant in her teenage years and continued to work in that capacity until she married Great Blasket

Islander Pádraig Ó Guithín in 1892 (Sayers, 1998: 194). She went to live on the Great Blasket Island and spent forty years there, bearing ten children, six of whom died. All of her surviving children, except one, emigrated to the United States. Described by Patricia Coughlan as ‘the finest storyteller of the age’ (2007: 2), scholars Máire Ní Chinnéide and Léan Ní Chonalláin encouraged Sayers to publish an account of her life story. In her sixties, and with failing eyesight, Peig dictated this story, and her son Mícheál Ó Guithín transcribed it. In 1936, *Peig* was published, with Ní Chinnéide as editor. Two school editions followed. The first was published ‘tar éis na bliana 1945’ [after the year 1945] (Sayers, 1998: 186); the second in 1958 with further standardization. In 1998, a new edition was published with a scholarly essay and comprehensive notes on dialect, context and morphology (Sayers, 1998:186). The rationale for the 1998 text was to make the work available, in the words of the editors, ‘do léitheoirí Gaeilge na linne seo, agus an urraim atá tuillte aige mar cháipéis liteartha, shóisialta agus stairiúil, agus go deimhin, mar shampla luath tábhachtach de litríocht na mban san aois seo, a thabhairt dó’ [for contemporary Irish readers, to bestow the honour that the text deserves as a literary, social and historical document; and as an early and important example of women’s literature] (Sayers, 1998: ix).¹

Historically, critical analyses of *Peig* fall into several categories. Critics have emphasized her consummate skills as Irish language *seanchaí* [storyteller] and the unbroken link to the oral tradition that her autobiography represents.² Other critics and historians have placed *Peig* in the context of the Blasket Island autobiographies, along with *Fiche Bliain Ag Fás* [Twenty Years A Growing] (Ó Súilleabháin, 1933), *An tOileánach* [The Islander] (Ó Criomhthain, 1980) and *Allagar na hInse* [The Island Disputation] (Ó Criomhthain, 1928). It is noteworthy, however, that, as Luchitti comments, these are all ‘masculine renditions of island life’ (2010: 71). When translating the work into English in 1974, Bryan MacMahon attempted to convey ‘the tone and spirit of the original of this simple but moving autobiography’ (Sayers, 1974: 7).³ Indeed, the choice of *Peig* for translation was, according to Alan Titley, an important one, where ‘only the most specific and rural

¹ All translations from Ní Mhainnín, M and Ó Murchú, L P (eds.) *Peig: A Scéal Fein* (Sayers, 1998) are the author’s own. While the text is available in English, the translations provided here will give the reader an opportunity to appreciate the array of devices evident in *Peig*.

² Diarmaid Ferriter (2004) categorizes *Peig* as ‘biography’ (380), presumably as Peig herself did not write her life’s account. In their discussion of ‘na húrscéalta is fearr, is tábhachtaí, is lárnaí sa Ghaeilge’ [the best, the most important, the most central novels in Irish], Doherty, Ó Conchubhair and O’Leary also classify *Peig* as biography (2017: 11).

³ Ní Mhainnín and Ó Murchú (Sayers, 1998: xi) recommend that *Peig* should be read in tandem Peig Sayers’s second work, *Machnamh Seanmhná* (Sayers, 1939). The latter was translated in 1962 by the Irish musician and scholar, Séamus Ennis (Sayers, 1962). In his Introduction to *Peig: Labharfad le Cách / I Will Speak to You All*, Bo Almqvist acknowledges the importance of Ennis, along with W.R. Rodgers and Seán Mac Réamoinn, in preserving recordings of Peig for future generations (2009: 199).

and bucolic texts' were chosen (2011: 262). However, scholarship on *Peig* has taken a new turn in recent years, perhaps best described by Maureen Murphy as studies that comprise 'the rehabilitation of Peig Sayers' by scholars such as Margaret Mac Curtain, Patricia Coughlan and Irene Lucchitti (Murphy, 2015: 245). Murphy comments, for example, on how Mac Curtain argues in her seminal essay, 'Writing Grief into Memory', that Peig's story exemplified a 'contemplative and spiritual self' (245). In emphasizing what Murphy terms the 'public aspects of [Peig's] life' (47), Irene Lucchitti's work on Peig uses the Kantian idea of 'unsocial sociability' to examine the autobiography which was 'the first to offer a feminine perspective on island life' (2010: 71); and research by Patricia Coughlan examines the 'narrative art and aesthetic effectiveness' of Sayer's works (2007: 4). A further example of the more recent critical reappraisals of *Peig* is Lillis Ó Laoire's work on questions of reproduction and women's lives in Peig's narratives (2016).

Peig opens with several narrative devices to encapsulate seemingly incompatible aspects of her life story, past and present. Using flashback and foreshadowing with which to temporally place herself in her advanced years, she recounts how she has 'cos léi insan uaigh is an chos eile ar a bruach' [she has one foot in the grave and the other foot on its edge] (Sayers, 1998: 1). The subtlety with which she depicts herself in the third person highlights one of the centrally important elements to the autobiography, namely, a frequently shifting perspective. Her juxtaposition of old age, 'seanbhean' [old woman] (Sayers, 1998: 1), with the joys and blissful ignorance of youth is a poignant indication of the shape that the autobiography will take (1). Similarly, *Peig* concludes with a flashback to her youth with her friend Cáit Jim (Sayers, 1998: 184). In this way, the autobiography involves temporal shifts at the beginning and at the end. There is a sense throughout that Peig perceives time cyclically. The image of the grave appears to function as both spatial metaphor for and as a direct sign of death. However, that same metaphor is only half the image: it is qualified by a reference to life lived beyond the grave. A sense of hope is portrayed at times in the text through Sayers's use of 'misniúil' and 'misneach' ['courageous' and 'courage'] (Sayers, 1998: 1), reminiscent of Máirtín Ó Cadhain's more ebullient passages in *Cré na Cille* [Graveyard Clay] (Ó Cadhain, 1949), which Harman terms a 'never ending wake' (2016). While Ó Cadhain's graveyard is one of black humour and shambolic squabbling in the clay—described by Steve Coleman as a 'key trope' which largely symbolizes the 'Western Irish-speaking lower middle classes' (2022: 291)—the graveyard earth in Peig's work is, sadly, all too real. As the autobiography progresses, the grave beckons and takes five of Peig's ten children before their time. For all its modernist brilliance, the irony of *Cré na Cille* is that the pain of bereavement is an aspect of death that Ó Cadhain's novel elides. In contrast,

the multiple bereavements borne by Peig through illness, accident and enforced emigration, is perhaps reflective of the story of Ireland in the early 20th century.

Beginnings: Home, Poverty, Housing

The local class divisions and cleavages that comprise the economic and social structure constraining Sayers's life choices are narrated throughout the autobiography. These rigid structures are a major factor in determining the course of Peig's life. However, when Peig describes the universal problem of poverty, it is noteworthy that she does not overtly attribute it to any structural deficits. She ascribes the causes of poverty to bad luck, and wealth to its opposite, good fortune, described as 'an t-ádh' [luck] (Sayers, 1998: 1), suggesting that amelioration of poverty can only be achieved through 'foighne' [patience] (79). However, Peig also discusses the importance of freeing oneself from the controlling power of others, 'fé láimhe dhaoine eile' [under other peoples' hands], in some detail with her new island friend Cáit Ní Bhrian (138). Peig stresses the need for 'misneach' [courage] (79). References to the impact of landlordism on mothers and children are consistent, reflecting an issue throughout Ireland.⁴ In the first few chapters, Sayers refers to the rights of 'daoine bochta' [poor people] (29), and how 'bhí an saol ana-chruaidh ar dhaoine bochta' [life was very hard on poor people] (31). This description ranges from an account of how a neighbour, Freálaí, claimed that he never took any money from a poor person, 'níor thugas luach pingne ó dhuine bocht riamh' (36); to a reference to poverty as a source of heartbreak 'bochtaineacht agus briseadh croí' [poverty and heartbreak] (79). There is a historical dimension to this poverty as well; Freálaí recalls the impact of the Great Famine (1845–1848) on domestic life (37). Much of this poverty is ascribed to landlords whom Sayers describes as casting tenants out on the side of the road, 'an treontaí caite amach' [the tenant thrown out] (17). In addition, Peig highlights local class divisions when she remarks that the schoolmaster is somebody who 'beathaíodh go maith ina bhunóic é' [he was well fed as a baby] (15).

This is a clear indication of Peig's understanding of the connections between class, educational advantage and material wealth, and their impact on reproductive justice for mothers and their children. However, this is not the only cleavage in the text. In a comment on the linguistic divisions between English and Irish residents of the neighbouring town of Dingle, the text relays how the lights of the English-speaking houses were darkened the night that the town welcomed back Brídín Shráid Eoin. This

⁴ Seoirse Mac Tomáis writes of the land question on the Great Blasket Island in pre-Famine days (1977: 4). He refers to the Landlord mistreatment of the native population, extracting rents from them and evicting them when they could not pay. Mac Tomáis also notes, however, that the sea offered the islanders some measure of protection from landlord persecution.

‘cailín bocht’ [poor girl] spent six months in prison for refusing to give information to the Royal Irish Constabulary (Sayers, 1998: 85). It is those same binaries and juxtaposition of opposites that allow Sayers to employ phraseology such as ‘sólás agus dólás’ [happiness and sadness] (Sayers, 1936: 152), drawing on what Alan Dundes terms the oppositional proverb (1994: 53). Marcas Mac Coinnigh notes how proverbs can be described in a number of different ways, including simple, compound, complex and compound-complex (2015: 113). The basic sentence structure is ‘typically simple, declarative, non-oppositional and stylistically unmarked’. While Peig’s use of proverbs in her narrative frequently follows this pattern, her use of *sólás* and *dólás* follows those type of sayings in Irish that have an oppositional structure. One example of this pattern is found in the following oppositional proverb: *an áit a mbíonn an sólás bíonn an dólás ina aice* [where there is light, there is also darkness]. In *Peig*, this linguistic structure captures a thematic dichotomy between happiness and sadness, darkness and light and, ultimately, encapsulates Peig’s fate as a young girl going into service.

Housing and justice feature in the early part of the autobiography in the context of the Land League, particularly in relation to their significance for mothers and their offspring. Peig notes how the land question is ‘ag suaithheadh na tíre’ [upsetting the country] (Sayers, 1998: 17); and that ‘Bhí Ceist na Talún ar siúl fós’ [the Land Question was still ongoing] (59). In the context of local rumours surrounding the eviction of one Muiris Feirtéar of Baile Uachtarach, Peig comments that this was the right time for the people of Corca Dhuibhne to ‘ag seasamh dá gceart’ [stand up for their rights] (17). These demands arose out of the long-standing questions of tenant rights in rural Ireland, a matter that impacted upon the family unit.⁵ Peig’s political consciousness regarding the plight of tenants and the poor, reveal her outward looking mentality, with a clear understanding of basic principles of social justice, based on direct experience. The concepts of servitude and dependency are reflected in Sayers’s reiteration of the terminology of dependency, for example, ‘ag brath’ [dependent] (42, 43). Through reiteration and repetition, she gives an account of the continual difficulties and challenges of the rural poor in working ‘fé bhais an chait’ [literally meaning, ‘under the cat’s paw’, or in difficult circumstances] and the stress experienced in lacking a place that Peig could consider her own home (137).

The domestic context in which Peig’s sister-in-law, Cáit, comes to live with Peig and her family plays a central role in the direction her life would take: leaving school at an early age, entry into domestic service and early marriage.⁶ Adding to the existing

⁵ For detailed discussion of the developments of the concepts of rights, fate, courage and luck in Irish, see McQuillan (2004).

⁶ Robin Flower writes that Peig told him she married at 17 years of age (1944: 59).

socioeconomic pressures to which Peig was subject, there is the apparent jealousy that her brother's wife felt towards Peig. These different factors reflect a complexity of characterisation in the autobiography that critical readings on *Peig* underestimate somewhat. Mac Conghail argues that it was Peig who was jealous of her sister-in-law, having been very close to her older brother, Seán (1987: 156). Yet the text of *Peig* does not substantiate this claim; that jealousy and resentment coloured the relationship between Peig and Cáit is certain, but the emotional factors at play in this regard were far from straightforward, as evidenced by Peig's return to her father's house in Baile Bhiocáire as a married woman, where Cáit welcomes her warmly. The narrative of *Peig* suggests that one of the reasons for Peig's entry into service as a teenager was her sister-in-law's jealousy. The course of Sayers's life, her mental health and that of her parents appeared radically changed as a result of the domestic tensions brought about by Cáit's presence as Seán's wife, tensions that Peig intimates through use of the terms 'toirmeasc' [argument] 'achrann' [dispute] and 'íde béil' [verbal abuse] (Sayers, 1998: 13). Peig is explicit on the matter in one instance: 'ní raibh aon mhúinín agam as bean mo dhearthár' [I did not trust my brother's wife] (19).

One of the most interesting devices in *Peig* is that of hyperbole, described by John Mullan as a 'comic tradition of exaggeration in the English novel' (2006: 239). In the autobiography, Peig depends at times on hyperbole to recount miscommunications and misunderstandings. Although she often uses dramatic language to describe fraught relationships, there is no suggestion that the events are exaggerated. An example of this type of language use is present in Peig's account of jealousy and envy. Peig does not always frame jealousy as a malignant emotion, but more as an ambiguous feeling, one that can arise out of a healthy regard and respect for what another person has, or is. This is evident when Peig considers how her newly emigrated friend, Cáit Jim, may be jealous of her (Sayers, 1998: 123); or how she recounts a story of a man who was jealous of his wife.⁷ For all that, jealousy functions as an important addition to any narrative that might otherwise be homogenous. The multifaceted and hyperbolic descriptions of jealousy are in stark contrast to her pejorative accounts of verbal abuse. She overhears her father discussing Peig's entry into service so he can have some peace, 'níos mó suaimhnis', from arguments concerning Peig with her sister-in-law (22). Both Peig's and her mother's lack of choice in this matter is underlined by her father's reprimand to Peig to 'Stop Suas!' [Stop that!] (22). The realization that Cáit wishes Sayers to leave the family home is apparent when we read that Peig overhears

⁷ Declan Kiberd describes Peig as 'a beautiful as well as a gifted young woman' (2006: 540). While this may have been based upon the personal opinion of Kenneth Jackson as noted by Mac Conghail (1987: 158), we cannot assume that these factors played a part in the tensions between herself and her sister-in-law.

her sister-in-law proclaiming that ‘bíodh tigh éigin eile aici’ [may she go to another house] (46). Soon after, her father removes her from school and she enters service in Ó Curráin’s house in Dingle. As Isobel Ní Riain notes (2015: 3), Sayers’s anxiety is often reflected in her descriptions of the landscape around her, when she projects her emotions onto the physical environment in which she finds herself. Furthermore, such descriptions signify how the masculine and the feminine authority figures in her life, namely her mother and father, cannot fully protect her. This contrasts with the image of strong female figures in the narrative, such as Bríde Liath, Brídín Shráid Eoin and of Cáit Mhuiris, who takes on her husband’s male tormentor (Sayers, 1998: 82, 83).

Peig’s account of the early part of her life has universal resonances on a number of different levels, both contemporary and historical. Her description of her precarious housing situation as an unmarried woman of her class mirrors issues of domestic instability for women in Ireland, Britain, Europe and the Global South during her own lifetime that various scholars have highlighted (Lloyd, 2007; Verdon, 2002; Weinstein, 2021). Alan Titley writes in *Nailing* that in the course of debates on education in Ireland, it was claimed that Peig Sayers ‘blighted the youth of Ireland for more than a generation’ (2011: 83). It is not without irony, that considering how *Peig* was, according to Ferriter, the subject of ‘resentment and derision’ (2018: 275), the autobiography gives a realistic and emotional account of the impact of housing precariousness on a young, single woman—a major social challenge that persists in contemporary Ireland and other countries across the globe (Waldron, 2002). In addition, Peig’s openness in describing her emotional responses and her descriptions of fears, anxieties and jealousies are universal in theme. Her account of these themes departs from the local in that she identifies people within her various social circles who, according to her account, caused difficulties for her in her life. With the publication of *Peig*, she emerges into what Ferriter calls ‘the national sometimes international spotlight in the 1930s and 1940s’ (2004: 379). She was no longer talking to a local, Irish audience; Peig Sayers was now speaking to an international audience, and describing social challenges in a universal language of emotion and reflection. She was doing so through her son, through the original Irish text, and through the translated English text.

Survival: Work, Marriage, Children

Titley notes how the theme of work, ‘obair, obair, obair’ [work, work, work] is a constant in many of the *Gaeltacht* autobiographies (2021: 234). For example, he comments that material concerns—as well as a description of prices, salaries, and wages—is nowhere more evident than in Pádraig Ua Cnáimhsí’s account of Róise Mhic Grianna’s life, *Róise Rua* [*Red Rosie*] (Ua Cnáimhsí, 1988: 235). Similarly, Peig’s account of work is highly important

for a number of different reasons. First, she frequently reflects on work in the context of social issues and local class hierarchies; second, work available to Peig was gender-specific and limited, mainly to the domestic sphere. For example, the kind of service labour available to Peig is similar to what Glenn describes as ‘reproductive labour’ such as ‘purchasing household goods, preparing and serving food, laundering and repairing clothing, maintaining furnishings and appliances, socializing children, providing care and emotional support for adults, and maintaining kin and community ties’ (1998: 1). A poignant aspect of Peig’s life in service is both her longing for her own mother combined with a propensity for deep reflection and thought on what it means to be a woman of her class in her time. This happens particularly in the company of the old servant woman in her employer’s house, Neil, with whom she shares a room, and with whom she converses at length on what life holds in store for her. The experience of being at work, or in service, prepares Sayers for motherhood. Furthermore, it is a central moment in her developing consciousness about class and gender divides. Those divides are captured in a remarkable account of an altercation with a male servant when in service for the second time. Peig’s awareness of the respect in which the young man is held—and the lack of respect shown to her—is noted by the understated ‘Do bhí sórt urraim don mbuachaill’ [there was a kind of respect for this boy] (Sayers, 1998: 118). An argument that follows between them shows how the young man reminds Sayers of the labour and gender divide between men and women, ‘Ní dom chúramsa cúram cailín’ (Sayers, 1998: 119) [a girl’s job is not my job]. Peig’s strength of character is perhaps nowhere more evident than in these vignettes in her autobiography that highlight the differences in attitudes to male and female labour.

The description of Sayers’s second experience of service traces a psychological transition from one of service to her entering a state of servitude. Ní Mhainnín and Ó Murchú describe that second experience as ‘sclábhaíocht go moch is déanach ar bheagán bídh is ar phá na hainnise’ [slaving early and late for a small amount of food and for terrible pay] (Sayers, 1998: xii). On entering her second place of service, for example, she expresses how she feels a darkness coming over her: ‘doircheacht an domhain orm’ (114). This is the starkest reminder in the work of the way in which Peig experienced service as tantamount to a loss of autonomy and freedom. Indeed, she refers to a state of existing under a burden of lack of freedom [‘fé dhaoirse’], and the desire to be free from control [‘ó dhaorsmacht’] in the context of her working life (114). Of note is the nuanced manner in which Sayers represents her own marriage as both loss and gain, in that she narrates it as a period of closed opportunity, yet representing a time when she will have more possibilities to think in the comfort of her own home. The implications of her marriage mean that she can no longer go to America, her ultimate dream. By the same token, what appears linguistically as the insular act of travelling to the Blasket Island

after her marriage, an image emphasized by Irish syntax that describes the journey as *going into the island* through use of *isteach* [in]: ‘ag basaíl leo isteach’ [paddling in] (132), heightens the sense of claustrophobia. Conversely, Sayers describes excursions to the mainland as ‘ag dul amach’ [going out] (143).

While Peig does not discuss the relationship with her husband in any intimate way in her autobiography, the impact of marriage on the young woman is among the most significant sections of the book. Michael Pierson notes how social class has taken ‘a back seat in the broad fields of cultural and literary studies, overlaid by a growing interest in the politics of identity, race, gender and sexuality’ (2011: 1). Nonetheless, commentators writing on *Peig* have observed how the social class in which young men and women of Sayer’s background lived determined marriages (Mac Conghail, 1987: 55; Sayers, 1998: xii). Ferriter notes how deeply class distinctions in Irish society ran the early 20th century (2004: 504). In the first instance, *Peig* gives an account of a local culture where reproduction and marriage are intertwined, and where both are considered socially necessary. Second, Peig explores the actual lived experience of motherhood on the island in some detail, followed by an account of the end of her life as an ageing woman. Crucially, it is during her time in service that we read of Sayers’s growing consciousness and awareness around the limited choices open to her. In addition, that stage of her life corresponds to an increased anxiety. Sayers comments on this social structure in language that is both affective and politically conscious. She often relays her observations of political events, class divisions and social structures through changing perspectives from childhood to middle age and to old age. What is particularly noteworthy is the constant thread in Peig’s life of sustaining friendships with other women: from her mother to Neil, to Nain, to Cáit Ní Bhrian and the island women, and to her best friend, Cáit Jim. Although they will never see each other again after Cáit Jim leaves for America, she remains a central part of Peig’s life and of her imagination.

Throughout the autobiography, Peig gives precedence to the emotional significance of her role as mother and to other experiences in her life. Mac Conghail notes how the bearing of children was taken as ‘evidence of a successful marriage’, but child mortality was high ‘both at birth and in the early years of life’ (1987: 55). Birth and death were inextricably linked in the life cycle and Peig’s experience as a mother is no exception.⁸

⁸ Ní Shúilleabháin notes how child mortality was a feature of the lives of women whom she interviewed for a TG4 Irish-language television series, and the accompanying book (2007: 6). The youngest of the women interviewed for the series was born in 1944, the oldest in 1913, describing the transition of the Republic of Ireland from a largely agricultural and poor country to a more technologically advanced, consumerist society: ‘Life contained all the joy and pain that is normal. Several women lost children, to miscarriage, in infancy, and most tragically of all, as full adults’ (Ní Shúilleabháin, 2007: 8).

Ferriter notes the absence of medical care on the Blasket Islands into the early part of the 20th century (2018: 380). The death rate of children was exceptionally high and on the first page of the autobiography, we read that nine of Sayers's siblings died as children (Mac Conghail, 1987: 156). Sayers's own relationship with her mother, who suffered ill health, is a close one. In one of the most poignant passages in the book, Sayers's father comes to separate the young girl from her mother, when he is taking her into the English-speaking town of Dingle for the first time, into a language and culture that she must quickly assimilate.

Figurative language is employed in a variety of ways within the text to address recurring motifs. Ó Fionnáin discusses how the use of colour in the modern Irish language comprises a 'unique way of seeing the world', and the importance of colour in dialogue and interaction is mirrored in Peig's use of language (2023: 4). For example, she depicts local people's attitudes towards the police in Dingle with phraseology such as 'níl siad geal do na póilíní' [they are not brightly disposed towards the police] (Sayers, 1936: 89). Melancholia, a frequent visitor, is described by Peig as a 'scamall dubh' [black cloud] (Sayers, 1998: 143). Her thoughts about marriage, however, frequently return to concrete concerns, particularly that of housing. While the anxiety of having or being without a home is sometimes expressed using figurative language, the narrative frequently stresses the importance of housing as a practical aspect to the marriage contract. This is evident in the term 'margadh' [market] for the matchmaking process (131). In addition, Peig reflects on how the comfort of having her own home, referred to throughout the narrative as 'tigh' [house] (49), would afford her a degree of control over her life, and give her the ability to sit quietly in moments of upset:

... gurbh fhearr dom fear cúil agus garda cosanta, agus tigh, a bheith agam féin go mbeadh neart agam suí i bhfeighil mo shuaimhnis nuair a bheinn cortha.

... that it would be better for me to have a man who would support and defend me, and to have a house of my own, so that I will be able to sit quietly when I am upset. (131)

The emphasis here on security, housing and protection in the context of marriage is significant, particularly in light of Alan Titley's observations that material concerns are a consistent theme in many Gaeltacht autobiographies, such as the autobiography of *Róise Rua*, referred to above (2021: 235). Other metaphors used to describe the economic realities of Peig's life are 'arán saor' [free bread] (Sayers, 1998: 130). She sometimes conveys her reflections on marriage as displacements where she appears to project her own ideas onto others, revealing as she does her private thoughts on marriage. When it comes to her own marriage match, the lack of dialogue is one of the most noteworthy

elements of the account, revealing the ambiguity of her feelings on the subject. At that juncture, Peig understands that in order to have her own house, she will have to get married (131). The perspective changes at this point, from retrospective of past event, to a consideration that places work in the present tense. Peig achieves this time-shift by the use of the second person singular, where she addresses her beloved friend directly and in poignant terms: ‘Mo shlán beo chúit, a Cháit Jim!’ [Farewell to you, Cáit Jim!] (132). This direct address in the text mirrors *skaz*, a term used by Russian formalists to describe what Mullan terms ‘first-person narrative that seems to adopt the characteristics of speech’ (2006: 58). Further examples of this type of language range from Peig’s conversational ‘Sea’ [Yes] and her second person use of ‘a léitheoir’ [dear reader] (Sayers, 1998: 154, 149). These examples show how Peig utilizes language and diction, normally occurring within direct speech, as part of a written autobiographical narrative.

The implications of such narrative devices become evident in Peig’s account of her intimate life. For example, in the passages following her marriage, we see several spatial and temporal contractions in the text. Instead of descriptions about her intimacy with her new husband or the discovery of her pregnancy, we read that ‘bhí an saol ag gluaiseacht go mall righin ar nós an chloig agus bhí an t-am ag druim liomsa’ [life was moving slowly and steadily like the clock and the time was drawing near] (Sayers, 1998: 143). The exclusion of the reader, or listener, from Peig’s intimate space is achieved by focalisation on the impersonal rhythmic passing of time in the literal sense. In the figurative sense, there is an assumption of personal intimacy.

Peig’s description of labour, marriage and children is local and universal in a number of ways. In the first instance, many events in *Peig* relating to labour connect directly or indirectly with marriage, where marriage was a necessary, and arranged, affair. *Peig* provides Sayer’s unique account of issues surrounding her marriage and her service; but arranged marriages were common beyond the Great Blasket Island, both nationally and internationally. Buckley comments on the importance of the ‘arranged marriage’ in the period c.1730-c.1880, covering the period shortly before Peig’s arranged marriage (2018). Global examples of arranged marriages are plentiful, and Peig’s experience resonates with the experience of marriage in many countries at this time. For example, the practice was the norm in much of China in this period (Lu, 2021). In rural India, Kadam shows that arranged marriages were connected with the caste system (2015); Quirk and Rossi argue that slavery and the process of European colonialism heavily influenced patterns of arranged marriage in African societies (2022). Peig’s lack of choice did not prevent the portrayal of a fruitful and fulfilling life in the autobiography, yet that same lack of choice and the inevitability of motherhood remains a significant aspect to the work. Peig’s description of her responses to her

circumstances sometimes appear to mirror that of postpartum depression (PPD). Although PPD was first observed by French physician Esquirol in the 19th century, treatment for such depression and melancholia would not have been common until later in the 20th century (Sparks, 2013). A universal experience for young mothers after childbirth, Peig is clearly aware of the physical dangers of motherhood for a woman. She describes the perils of motherhood when she recounts the experience of her brother's wife; and when Sayers's own marriage festivities are marred by the death of the woman in childbirth. Finally, the importance of her relationships and emotional bonds with older women other than her mother are plentiful throughout the book: from citing Neil as taking the place of her own mother; to her mother in law, with whom she developed a close relationship and who acted as a nurse to her first child (Sayers, 1998: 149). The post-Famine period in the west of Ireland, of which Peig was writing, would have been part of what Ciara Breathnach terms a 'mixed medical economy' that included many 'traditional practitioners' (2022: 3). Peig does not describe any specific encounters with the medical profession in her narrative and in her comments on childbirth and motherhood. Yet while evidence of similar experiences is extant in medical and archival accounts, what remains unique about *Peig* is her reflective response on her own experiences and the dangers of motherhood. This is all the more extraordinary given the dearth of such first-hand Irish language accounts of childbirth and marriage from women of her class.

Endings: Friends, Foes, Loss

Despite the heartbreak and constant challenges that run like a thread through the autobiography, it is 'sisters', women such as Cáit, who offer Peig comfort, friendship and support in her life. A few days after her arranged marriage in 1892, Peig describes herself standing at a well on the Great Blasket Island to collect water. She thinks of her mother, and of the dramatic turn that her life has just taken. A neighbouring woman friend, Cáit Ní Bhriain, the weaver's wife, sees her and makes her way towards her. In a moving passage, Cáit tells Peig that it will be easy for her to find a sister on this island: 'an-fhuiriste dhuitse deirfiúr d'fháil ar an Oileán seo' (Sayers, 1998: 138). Our last image of Peig in the autobiography is as a young woman, with her friend Cáit Jim: 'Dob é sin an radharc déanach a fuairamar ar a chéile' [that was the last time we ever saw one another], she had recounted earlier in the text (113). Sayers had by this time returned to Baile an Bhíocáire and the mainland, where she would live out the remainder of her life (Ó Súilleabháin, 2001: 5). Laden with high drama, both accounts are significant for their emphasis on female support, and for Peig's loyalty to the friendships she made throughout her life.

The theme of motherhood and the experience of childbirth is one that is marked by a shift in what Bridgeman calls the 'narrative world' and a transition to a new dimension (2007: 60). Peig describes this change when she states how she feels a 'scamall dubh' [dark cloud] coming over her as she returns to her own mother to give birth (Sayers, 1998: 143). While reproduction is something that Peig is fearful of and that is marked by 'an t-uaigneas' [loneliness] (143), it is also indicative that within that relative lack of freedom, an affective, positive freedom of choice exists. For example, her mother-in-law tells her she may go where she is most comfortable, 'ón uair gurb é is fearr leat é' [since that is what you would most like] (143). Death is personified in *Peig* as a force to be reckoned with; an active agent of doom who snatched ['sciob'] three of her family from her, and a force that Sayers disparagingly and somewhat comically refers to as in the concluding passages of the autobiography as 'an rógaire sin' [that rogue] (154, 184). In a deeply moving passage, Sayers narrates her last conversation with her son Tomás, who died in a cliff fall. Perhaps the most literary passage in the autobiography, her account interweaves the image of the green of his eyes with the softness of his hand as he stretches it across the table to her the morning before leaving the house for the last time. The sense of touch in the account comprises a rare use of synecdoche, as described by Malcolm Hebron (2004: 151): the softness of the boy's hand appears to symbolise the softness of the body that will later be crushed when it meets its hard fall on the cliff's rocks. Similarly, the reference to Tomás's green eyes is both synecdoche and synaesthesia: the green of his eyes stands, in part, for the green of the sea that he falls towards, while the colour green recreates the feeling of the cold touch of the sea. Peig's use of similes, and the concentration of colour, touch and sound, leave an impression of a consummate master of storytelling. She uses amplification in her narrative to heighten the negative emotions in the passage, and to express the painful act of preparing her son for burial (Sayers, 1998: 159). In her exploration of enchantment in reading literature, Rita Felski writes of the possibility 'of an emotional, even erotic cathexis onto the sounds and surfaces of words' (2008: 63). She describes reading as an experience of changing 'intensities of affinity and involvement are conjured out of the bare bones of intonation and modulation, ways of speaking, timbre and tonality, the tempo of style'. In the same way, the passages in *Peig* that recount Tomás's death and burial are redolent of a unique soundscape where sound, image and word meet. Furthermore, although Bryan MacMahon's 1974 English language translation succeeds in capturing the tone and content of the original Irish, a large part of the impact of the original passages is realized through prosody and onomatopoeia.

With regard to the universality of the emotions and experiences conveyed in the autobiography, it is also noteworthy that the method of transmission was not limited

to Irish texts. Micheál Ó Guithín was following an internationally used method in the life narrative genre when transcribing his mother's life story. A number of notable life narratives of Blasket Islanders were written in this manner.⁹ Amanuensis was well established by the 18th and 19th centuries and was used for the transcription of the 19th-century African American slave narrative of Elizabeth Keckley (1988). It was also frequently used for autobiographical works depicting experiences of women belonging to Peig's social class in environments far beyond the Blasket Islands, and captured the experiences of those who lived under those difficult circumstances of labour and servitude that Peig describes as being 'fé bhais an chait' [under a cat's paw] (Sayers, 1998: 137). In Peig's case, she was able to read and write in English, but the necessity to dictate her account was largely due to failing eyesight (Mac Conghail, 1987: 161).¹⁰

A further layer of complexity to *Peig* is Sayers's role as homodiegetic narrator. A term used by Gérard Genette, it describes narrators who are 'also characters in the storyworld (or diegesis) and therefore necessarily closer to the action than heterodiegetic narrators, who stand outside the storyworld' (Porter Abbott, 2007: 42). Ní Mhainín and Ó Murchú write that because of the process of transcription by her son and editor, it was not always possible to ascertain whether Peig's 'guth neamhspleách' [independent voice] reached us in the autobiography (Sayers, 1998: x).¹¹ Coughlan

⁹ As in the case of *Peig*, the account is described by Risteard Breathnach in his Introduction to *Ar Muir is Ar Tír* as a 'saol anróch' [a life of hardship] spent on sea and land (Ó Catháin, 1991). A distinction, however, is Breathnach's acknowledgement of the input of the amanuensis: '... ní hionann san agus a rá ná fuil blúirí uaim féin inti' [that is not to say that there are not parts that have come from me here] (8). This contrasts with the Introduction by Peig Sayers's son, Micheál Ó Guithín, in the Irish secondary school edition of *Peig*, where he makes no comment on his role as transcriber.

¹⁰ Ní Mhainín and Ó Murchú comment that Peig was unable to write her own account; and Mac Conghail claims that Peig could read English (Sayers, 1988: ix). Peig's own account of reading contrasts with a claim of Mac Tomás that she was illiterate (1977: 6). Her inability to read or write in her later years may simply have been due to old age and failing eyesight, as Mac Conghail notes (1987). Given that Peig was born in 1873, English would have been the language in which she received instruction in national school. She describes how some of her books would have had Irish on one side of the page, and English on the other (Sayers, 1998: 15). This approach was central to the language shift from Irish to English in 19th-century Ireland, where schools made 'no provision' for either monoglot Irish speakers or bilingual speakers of English and Irish (Ó Buachalla, 1984: 75). Peig describes, for example, her early interest in books and that she had 'dúil an domhain [aici] féin insna leabhair agus insna pictiúirí deasa a bhíodh iontu' [a great interest in books and in the nice pictures that one would see in them] (Sayers, 1998: 2). However, this anecdote predates her attendance at school. She reminisces later in the narrative about the first Irish language book that she read at school: 'an chéad scéal Gaeilge a léas é' [the first Irish language story that I read] (21). She also describes how her schoolbooks had Irish on one side of the page, and English on the other (15). Peig also refers to her exposure to English language newspapers, and how when she was in service the *fear an tí* [man of the house] encouraged her to read newspapers, particularly the teachings of Thomas Davis (xi-xii). She reminisces about how Peig's own account of reading contrasts with a claim of Mac Tomás that she was illiterate (1977: 6). Her inability to read or write in her later years may simply have been due to old age and failing eyesight, as Mac Conghail suggests (1987).

¹¹ Alan Titley argues against conceiving of the 'dírbeathaisnéisí Gaeltachta' [Gaeltacht autobiographies] as 'social documents' (1996: 61). In a discussion on the categorization of Irish language literature, he comments on 'a phearsanta is a indibhidiúla' [how personal and how individual] the autobiographies are.

argues, however, that based on the evidence, that ‘we *should* credit Peig with her authorship, however collaboratively exercised in close conjunction with her son’ (2007: 7). Further to Coughlan’s argument, I contend that both use of language and Sayers’ reflective temperament in *Peig* is similar to that in other works containing her stories, such as *Labharfad le Cách / I Will Speak to You All*.

Peig Sayers had become an internationally renowned storyteller by the time the Great Blasket Island was evacuated in 1953 (Mac Conghail, 1987: 35). Among Peig’s new, and international, friends were scholars Robin Flower, Kenneth Jackson, and George Thomson; as well as visitors Máire Ní Chinnéide and Léan Ní Chonalláin.¹² Those ‘strangers’ (Sayers, 1998: 145), a word she uses to describe her own son on seeing him for the first time after his birth, become, in a sense, Sayers’s new children. Sayers’s fame as Irish language speaker and *seanchaí* [storyteller] attracted an increasing number of international visitors who came to learn Irish from her on the ‘[g]carragh mhille’ [cursed rock] (Sayers, 1998: 162). Yet despite that pejorative description of the Great Blasket Island, she is a proud and confident woman, recounting how she was ‘im shórt múinteora’ [I was a sort of teacher] to the visiting Irish scholars (170). This marks a new phase of life for Peig, not as ‘*mater dolorosa*’ [sorrowful mother] as described by Ní Mhainnín and Ó Murchú (Sayers, 1998: ix); but as *mater Hibernica* [Irish mother]. Yet despite her newfound fame, she appeared never to fall into the trap of committing, as Mary Beard would have it, a ‘niching’ of women’s public speech (2017: 25).

The dominance of *Peig* as a prescribed curriculum text for secondary school pupils was reflective of a culture where, as Ferriter notes, ‘the state came to institutionalise Blasket literature within the schooling system as a representation of national identity’ (2004: 380). Despite Peig envisaging the text as a story told to children (Sayers, 1998: 183), generations of Irish schoolchildren did not receive the autobiography well. Ferriter notes how ‘so many students were forced to study her book for the state examinations’ and that it was a ‘a schoolroom illustration of a true Gael in the manner derided by Flann O’Brien, in order to emphasize an approach to Irish and tradition that suggested ‘a past that would also be the future’ (2018: 274). Reasons for the ‘derision’ with which *Peig* has been treated are perhaps more nuanced and complex than the explanations that Ferriter offers. The image of Peig, an impoverished old Irish speaking woman was not, in the words of Lee, aligned with an Ireland striving towards modernity, and a society that placed such value ‘on inheritance and appearances’ (1989: 656). Lee notes that the blame over the poor reception of *Peig*, as a standard Irish-language text for the

¹² Kiberd writes of the influx of English scholars such as Flower that it was ‘hardly an accident (though it was a high old irony) that English radicals such as George Thomson and Robin Flower should come to this outpost of an ancient civilization in flight from such anglicization’ (2006: 530).

Leaving Certificate syllabus, lay not so much with schools but with the failure of the Irish State regarding language use. Nonetheless, the choice of a challenging work such as *Peig* for schools resulted in compulsory Irish becoming, in Lee's words, 'discredited' (671); and also led to an association between Irish and a life devoid of joy. Of relevance also is Mary Beard's sharp observation of how women 'who claim a public voice get treated as freakish androgynes' from the classical world to the modern day (2017: 22). Beard argues that such women are frequently excluded from public speech, and more importantly, that their exclusion has been 'paraded' (9). The derision that *Peig* has received may also arise from the contradictions involved in the cultural need to find a modern day Cailleach Bhéarra [Hag of Béarra] in independent Ireland, a symbolic character discussed at length by Máirín Nic Eoin (1998: 101–3).

'Fixed-type thinking' concerning *Peig* as an educational set-text for Irish-language teaching and as a cultural icon has perhaps led readers and critics to a view of *Peig* as rooted and attached solely to one, local place (the Great Blasket) and to one language (Irish).¹³ Malkki describes how the process of identity and place have been largely 'naturalized' in the modern nation state, and how this has given way to that concept of 'sedentarism' (1996:437–8). Yet *Peig* contains nuances, narrative devices, emotions and reflections that extend beyond the local confines of the Irish language, oral culture and the Great Blasket Island, beyond the framework of one woman's experience and beyond the confines of the autobiography. Like Elizabeth Keckley's slave narrative and those of other women who endured servitude, the experience of living 'fé bhais an chait' [under the cat's paw] extends across geographies and histories (Sayers, 1998: 137). In this article, I have shown that, although locally situated, the emotions that *Peig* describes are reflections on that 'difficult situation' and are universal by nature, revealing a rich inner life in the process. Through an analysis of narrative devices common to oral storytelling and written texts, the renowned storyteller's skilful account of her life allows for reflection on universal experiences from the female perspective: labour, housing, marriage, childbirth, relationships, bereavement, and old age. *Peig* Sayers's life prior to her marriage was already marked by emotional turbulence and loss. The difficult circumstances of her life were, as Ní Mhainnín and Ó Murchú point out, a 'phort gan stad' [a constant thread] in the text (xi). In time, Sayers would come to love the Great Blasket Island and its people. Much of the discontent in her autobiography can be attributed to a variety of social issues outside her control: her relative lack of autonomy

¹³ My description of 'fixed type thinking' in relation to *Peig* draws on Stanford psychologist Carol S. Dweck's mindset theory (2006). This theory describes the 'fixed mindset' and the 'growth mindset'. Although Dweck's theory has limitations for research philosophy, I believe the 'fixed mindset' aspect of the theory is useful in approaching works such as *Peig* with a fresh perspective.

and position in the social hierarchy of the time, her subsequent dependence on others, and the death and emigration of her children. As a work marked by strength, courage and exceptional resilience, *Peig* is one of the few accounts of the experiences faced by an Irish woman from the rural ‘subsistence class’ from childhood to middle age, and through to old age in rural Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th century (Coughlan, 2007: 1).

Alan Titley writes how Peig ‘was just an old woman telling her own story in her own terms, according to her own lights’ (2011: 84). *Peig*, however, is much more, both in terms of what her story tells us about the conditions of her class; and the books reception after its publication. Hirsch claims that, due to the mystification of what he terms ‘the Irish rural peasant’ within predominantly middle-class Irish Literary Revivalist and Gaelic League circles of the early 20th century, ‘social conflict in the countryside’ and ‘land agitation’ was not acknowledged (1991: 1122). And while Hirsch’s point is a valid one in the context of the land agitation of the 1880s, it is noteworthy that a number of English language plays such as ‘The Building Fund’ (Boyle, 1905), ‘The Land’ (Colum, 1905) and ‘The Gaol Gate’ (Gregory, 1906) deal more extensively with social conflict in rural Ireland. Representations of social conflict in Irish language literature of the period, however, were frequently less nuanced. For example, Ó Duinnín’s 1901 ‘Creideamh agus Gorta’ [Faith and Famine] portrays Catholics and Protestants, masters and servants, English and Irish speakers as homogenous groups with a noticeable absence of internal group conflict—particularly in the dynamics between males and females. In this sense, *Peig*—while not a work of fiction—is an important text in terms of the internal conflict it portrays as well as the gender-based tensions that she depicts.

Ní Mhainnín and Ó Murchú observe how, regardless of questions surrounding the editorial decisions of both Micheál Ó Guithín and Máire Ní Chinnéide in the transmission of her life story, *Peig* is one of the earliest accounts in her own words, by a woman of the rural subsistence class, in English or in Irish (Sayers, 1998: xi). Ní Mhainnín and Ó Murchú comment: ‘Tá sé ar cheann de na leabhair is luaithe, i nGaeilge nó i mBéarla, atá againn ó bhéal mná de ghnáthaicme na tuaithe in Éirinn’ [It is one of the earliest books, in Irish or in English, that we have from the mouth of a woman from the ordinary rural class in Ireland].¹⁴ In this article, I have shown that social conflict and reflections on class conflict are essential, yet heretofore largely unexamined, aspects of *Peig*. By the conclusion of the autobiography, we feel that we have been, as Felski writes, ‘drawn in by a cadence of tone’ (2008: 63). The universality of *Peig* lies in the social

¹⁴ The word used by Ní Mhainnín and Ó Murchú to describe Peig’s class here is ‘gnáthaicme’ or ‘ordinary class’ (Sayers, 1998: xi). For the purpose of clarity and precision, I use the term ‘subsistence class’ to denote Peig’s class position.

injustices and issues pertaining to women of Peig Sayers's class, and her emotional and reflective responses to them. As Margaret McCurtain notes, Peig had the bravery to speak out about what she had endured and overcame, 'in spite of the deep silence that characterised postfamine Irish society' (Preston, 2009: 142). Peig's courage is also contained in the depth of her response to the challenges she faced as a woman in her lifetime. Resilient and resourceful, courageous, honest and expressive in recounting the joys and hardships of her life, her autobiography is an account of an exceptional woman whose pride in her own unique culture and language stayed with her to the end of her days. Readers of *Peig* cannot help but be moved by the island girl who overcame so much and who forged lasting friendships, far and near. Perhaps Peig's lasting legacy as universal woman is the emotions and experiences she chronicles that are common to all women: love, heartbreak, sorrow, friendship, joy and loss.

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