*The Role of Motherhood Symbolization
in the Conflict Imagery of Northern Ireland*

Martin Forker

Mirrored versions of motherhood symbolism used by Nationalist and Loyalist have served both to unite and divide Northern Ireland. This narrow range of Irish symbolic representations of motherhood may be due to patriarchal influences of Orangeism, the Protestant dependency on the written word (Loftus, 1982), the patriarchal nature of the Old Testament, and the development of Protestantism's aniconic culture (Brett, 1999). Such motherhood symbolization is a powerful social organizer. In this visual essay, I discuss my own artwork, which has been influenced by my exposure to Renaissance/Catholic/Nationalist motherhood imagery in my childhood, as a form of social production (Wolff, 1983) that both resides within and yet disrupts the Irish motherhood discourse.

Contextualizing My Art of Motherhood Symbolization

Motherhood imagery has always played a dominant role in my artwork. Belinda Loftus' (1981) article, *Mother Ireland and the Troubles: Artist, Model and Reality*, underlines my Expressionist imagery of Belfast Catholic women's everyday lives in a notorious conflict area of Belfast in the mid-1970s (See Figure 1). Mike Catto (1977) described my imagery as a dark, nightmarish Belfast Expressionism presenting an uncompromisingly cruel view of local society and organized religion—a world full of people with grinning, cackling masks and holy innocents who have mask-like faces. Tony Gallagher[1] (cited in Forker, 2007) states:

> There is perhaps a danger of a reconstruction of memory, of an imagined golden age in which the brutal and brutalising effects of violence are washed away by a heady romanticism. These works by Martin Forker will serve as an antidote to such reimaginings … there is no romanticism here, no golden age, no heroes or heroines. Rather there are victims, lives destroyed, pain endured … his images challenge us to deal with the pain we must confront before there is any hope of cure. (p. 4)

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[1] Professor Tony Gallagher is head of the Graduate School of Education, Queen's University Belfast. He is a member of Democratic Dialogue, the main political think-tank in Northern Ireland and chaired the New Agenda initiative which worked with civil society groups to support the peace talks in Northern Ireland. His research interests include the role of education in ethnically divided societies and policies for social inclusion.

Figure 1. *Ghetto Madonna* (1977), Conte crayon on paper, 107 x 90 cm. Martin Forker My intention was to convey the intolerable strains imposed on mothers living in Turf Lodge, one of Belfast's most depressing post-war housing estates.[2]

Background to the Conflict

In order to understand the political significance of the imagery of motherhood in my artwork, I provide a synopsis of Ireland's history that has impacted my life, and therefore is the source of the symbolism in

which I communicate my emotional response and perspectives. Particularly, I focus in this historical overview on the background readers will need to interpret the use of motherhood symbolism associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland. The conflict in Northern Ireland (Ulster) has political and religious roots that are centuries old. In modern times, the conflict has centred on opposing views of the area's political status. Some people in Ulster, especially the mainly Protestant Unionist community, believe it should remain part of the United Kingdom. Others, particularly the Catholic Nationalist community, believe it should leave the UK and become part of the Republic of Ireland.

Since the 12th century, constant revolts challenged the often brutal British rule of Ireland, climaxing in the 1916 Easter Uprising in Dublin, and the chain of events leading to civil war and partition of the island. In the south, 26 counties formed a separate state, while six counties in the north stayed within the UK.

Over successive decades the Catholic minority in the north suffered discrimination over housing and jobs, which fuelled bitter resentment. In 1969, Catholic civil rights marches and counter-protests by Protestant loyalists spiralled into violent unrest. British troops were sent in to restore order but soon came into conflict with the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army).

Loyalist paramilitary groups responded with a campaign of sectarian violence against the Catholic community. As the situation worsened, Northern Ireland's parliament was suspended and direct rule was imposed from London. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s paramilitary groups waged violent campaigns to pursue their goals. The IRA carried out deadly bomb and gun attacks in Britain and Northern Ireland that targeted police, soldiers, politicians and civilians. Loyalist paramilitaries targeted Catholics in "tit-for-tat" killings.

Police and British forces tried to keep order, sometimes amid controversy, such as the alleged co-operation of some undercover units with loyalist groups. In the early 1990s, negotiations took place between political parties and the British and Irish governments. After several years of talks IRA and loyalist ceasefires held, and in 1998, the "Good Friday" agreement was signed. It set up a power-sharing executive, with ministerial posts distributed by party strength, and elected assembly. The deal

was backed by voters in referendums in Northern Ireland and the Republic, which scrapped its constitutional claim to the north.

Problems remained as devolution had been suspended several times since it began. It was last suspended in October 2002, over allegations of a Republican spying ring at Stormont. In September 2005, the arms decommissioning body confirmed the IRA had pulled all its weapons from use, but Unionists remained sceptical without any photographic proof of disarmament. However, elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly took place on 7 March 2007, and after agreeing to power sharing; full government was restored on 8 May 2007.

In a paper which attempts to discuss the role of motherhood symbolization in ethnic conflict, it seems appropriate to commence with John Darby's (1997) analogy of a divided community being akin to a bottle containing two scorpions—if the scorpions cannot be persuaded to mate, or at least to co-habit in a civilized manner within the same space, it may be better to recognize the fact, and look around for another bottle. Darby further argues that ethnic conflict, like the seeds discovered in the Egyptian pyramids, can lie sleeping for centuries and, given the right conditions, spring into life. The only solution, which history has shown to be completely effective in removing it, is genocide. Frank Wright (1994) concludes that the Ulster conflict will indefinitely continue, in one form or another, as the two main protagonists i.e., Loyalists and Nationalists, cannot be drawn into one final bloody battle because of the protection offered by the British military presence on Irish soil.

Conflict Imagery: Two Ways of Seeing

Belinda Loftus (1982) defines *conflict imagery* as interrelated parts of a visual language, which are in dialogue; an imagery that is infused with economic, social, and political forces located within evolving traditions. Irish identity figures such as *Mother Ireland* and mythological female icons such as *Faith* and *Humanity*, Orange/Green imagery,[3] and

propaganda ritual[4]—all provide an arena for a conflict between Unionists and Nationalists whose very mode of seeing is different from each other. Consequently, their comprehension of political, religious, and other aspects of their lives are distinctive and separate (Loftus, 1982).

However, each has its own cultural values and sets of strengths and weaknesses: the Protestant mode of vision to bear witness to the horrors of war is admirable but there is concern over its tendency to a neat abstract conformity. Conversely, Catholic imagery's figurative grasp of humanity with all its flaws has a strong appeal but is highly disturbing because of its over-easy sublimation of suffering and failure. Whilst loyalist symbols are clear-cut and imperialist, and are concerned with the written word; nationalist symbols are ambiguous and personal, and are dependent upon an oral and visual culture.

Mimetic Rivalry

There is a symbolic mimetic rivalry between the two protagonists in the Northern Ireland conflict (Forker, 2002). Girard (1981) argues that there is a human propensity for violence, which is rooted in desire, and that

Republican Army) and PIRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army), Easter Lilies, Green Ribbons, the Irish Tricolour, dates such as 1916 or 1798, or slogans such as *Tiochfaidh ar la! (Our Time will Come!)*, Republican murals, and paraphernalia belonging to the Ancient Order of Hibernians or Glasgow Celtic football shirts.

Exemplars of 'Orange' or loyalist imagery may include Queen Elizabeth 11, Princess Diana, King William III, Orange Order Banners and sashes, the Union Jack, acronyms such as UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters), the date 1690, slogans such as *No Surrender and No Pope Here*, Remembrance Day poppies, bowler hats, red-clenched fists, Orange ribbons, and football shirts belonging to Glasgow Rangers.

4   Exemplars of propaganda rituals are the annual Easter marches commemorating the Irish Republican 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin and the Orange Order's annual Twelfth of July marches celebrating the victory of Protestant King William III over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

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3   Exemplifications of 'Green' or nationalist imagery may include iconographical figures such as Mother Ireland, St. Brigid, the Sacred Heart, the Virgin Mary, banshees, James Connolly, Bobby Sands and the Hunger Strikers, acronyms such as IRA (Irish

imitation is the driving force of rivalry causing it to grow, and often lead-ing to violence. This violence is then imitated and increasingly dominates the relationship between the rivals. For instance, both protagonists claim to have ownership of St. Patrick and Cuchulainn[5], an ancient Irish mytho-logical hero (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2. St. Patrick Banner. Permission granted by Dr. Neil Jarman, Director of the Institute for Conflict Research, Northern Ireland.

Figure 3. *Cuchulainn* mural located at Ardoyne Avenue, Belfast. Permission granted for figures 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 12 by Dr. Jonathan McCormick, Centre for the Study of Conflict: University of Ulster, Northern Ireland.

Death Imagery

In Northern Ireland, Catholics generally present death in a repre-sentative and religious fashion with strong allusions to the mainstream traditions of European art from the Middle Ages onwards, and with stress on the resurrection and sacrificial role of the victim. Loftus (1986) points out that contemporary Protestant imagery present death in a secular fashion with a tendency to refer to ancient cultures. Death is depicted as irredeemably grim, and as an occasional opportunity for bearing public witness to strongly held beliefs. These two perceptions of death are de-rived from Post-Reformation visual traditions of Catholicism and Prot-estantism, with some admixture of specifically political symbolism. In my depiction of *Rose with a Thorn*, the idea of death as being inherently dismal is palpable (see Figure 4).

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5   Legend has it that the shamrock was used by St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, to illustrate the Holy Trinity; hence, it's widespread use on St. Patrick's Day on 17 March. It is one of Ireland's national emblems, and is used mainly by the Nationalist tradition, but is also evident within the Unionist tradition, with the Royal Irish Rangers wearing the shamrock every St. Patrick's day. Cuchulainn, also known as the Hound of Ulster, or Setanta, can be found on both Republican and Loyalist murals. He is usually depicted dying against a pillar after he fought Queen Maeve's armies of Connaught. He embodies resilience against invaders; thus proving to be an apt figure for both Protestant and Catholic communities.

Figure 4. *Rose with a Thorn* (1978),
mixed media on paper, 100 x 85 cm. Martin Forker.

My objective was to convey the sacrificial role of motherhood. Rosie Nolan, a Catholic mother of a mentally handicapped child was separated from her husband, and hanged herself. There is wordplay on her name "Rosie." The name mirrors the urban legend of *Ring a Ring o'Roses*; a nursery rhyme interpreted as reference to the Black Plague which killed over twenty-five million people in fourteenth-century Europe. In this interpretation, 'Rosie' referred to the flowers used to adorn the corpses. The *Ring* referred to the round, red rash which was the first symptom of the disease. The ringed shapes of the electric light bulb and the noose underscore the grimness of her tragic suicide.

Motherhood Representations

Representations are signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings are produced and which position us as subjects. They produce meanings through which we make sense of our experience and of who we are. Indeed, these symbolic systems create the possibilities of what we may become. For example, Victor Turner (1967) points out that the *multivocality of womanhood* can be exemplified by a *Mudyi* tree which is equated with breast milk, a mother and child, materlineage, womanhood, and the wisdom of women. From another perspective, the essentialist myth of the *Perfect Mother* is that she must be all-loving, all-giving, and must embody all the qualities traditionally associated with femininity such as nurturing, intimacy, and softness (Forna, 1999). The symbolization of motherhood in Ireland can be understood in terms of a historical network of cultural determinations.

Derrida's notion of difference is integral to an understanding of the cultural construction of mirrored versions of motherhood symbolism in Ireland. Derrida's questioning of meaning constructed through binary opposition suggests that the dichotomy itself is a means of fixing meaning through which language as visual and textual symbolic representations secures relations of power: *differ* shades into *defer*—the idea that *meaning* is always deferred. Rather, Derrida argues that meaning is never complete but keeps on moving to encompass additional or supplementary meanings, which disturb the classical economy of language and representation (Norris, 1982). Without relations of difference, no representation can occur. What is seen is always open to being deferred, staggered, and serialised. Therefore, identities are constructed and formed in relation to *other* identities in terms of the Other; that is, in relation to what they are not (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Diana, Queen of Hearts*,
1961-1997 mural located at Hopewell Crescent, Belfast.
Princess Diana's mother, Frances Shand Kydd, was a devout and staunch Catholic.
However in this image, Diana's identity is reconstructed as belonging to the "other."
Thus, Diana becomes the Queen of Hearts; a motherhood symbol for Ulster Loyalists

There is a distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution; thus, motherhood is socially organised and is subject to historical and cross-cultural variations. Motherhood is about the past as well as the present and individuals reconstruct their notions of motherhood through their own experiences, socially and symbolically, and through social institutions and systems of representation. Irish nationalist myths of motherhood operate at the psychic level of the conscious and unconscious, and are subject to interventions by institutions like the state. They include constructs about proper maternal practices and the myths create tension between the *good* and the *bad* mother. Good mothers are pure whilst those who do not conform to social constructs are bad mothers. In Nationalist symbolisation, the mother must be good because the nation is sacred. Luce Irigaray (1985) argues that patriarchal systems of representation exclude the mother from culture. Irigaray believes that feminism should aim to create a society and culture which

recognise, cultivate, and accentuate the differences between the sexes, rather than encouraging sexual equality. Irigaray believes that Western culture subordinates women by denying and refusing to recognise their distinctiveness. Whitford (1991) develops a feminist critique within a psychoanalytic framework rejecting Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Irigaray in particular, with conceptualisation of the imaginary female body at the mirror stage as the male body. These different versions of womanhood/motherhood are significant, especially motherhood in terms of the version adopted as a political force in Ireland's Nationalist and Unionist symbolism of motherhood.

In the Irish conflict, some women saw themselves as Madonna-type figures. For example, the mothers of the Irish hunger strikers in the 1980s perceived themselves as sanctified mothers of dead Christ figures, incapable of controlling their own destinies. In stark contrast, Rita Duffy's *Mother Ulster* (Marshall, 1994) is a staunch Loyalist, similar to *Orange Peggy*, who wore an Orange flag to her christening in 1783. During *Orange Peggy's* 108 year lifespan, she attended every Fermanagh Orange or Black parade wrapped in an orange shawl (Loftus, 1990). *Orange Peggy* is a precursor of *Orange Lil*, a staunch but humorous celebrated female character attired in clothing festooned with Union Jack motifs, who can always be seen accompanying Orangemen during the annual 12th of July Orange parades.

However, there is no evidence of levity in Duffy's *Mother Ulster*. This is not a representation of the divine feminine as a compassionate mother. She is more akin to a monstrous step-mother or a tyrant who is capable of eating her children's flesh (Warner, 1994). Dressed in a tradiitional housewife's apron decorated with multiple motifs of the *Red Hand of Ulster,* she dominates the composition. Standing defiantly with her sleeves rolled up exposing her massive arms, and with hands on hips, her beady eyes look directly at the viewer with an immense fierceness. Surrounded by her two children, who are reminiscent of malevolent elves, an Orange bandsman can be seen playing a drum in the background. A child holds a phallic shaped yellow toy crane, a symbol of Ulster's rich ship-building heritage. The claustrophobic composition seems to suggest that *Mother Ulster* and her children are being besieged or under attack. Her hubristic stance is one of defiance and resistance.

Female Political Personifications

Images of women throughout the history of Ireland have engaged viewers and served as inspiration and propaganda. Female political personifications such as *Mother Ireland*, and female religious icons such as the Virgin Mary and the Protestant martyr Margaret Wilson, have potent political resonance, serving both to unite and divide the social, religious, and political domains. Important symbols are associated with narrative, and especially with myth and history. The symbol evokes the narrative, and it is the narrative, which has significance for the present.

Female symbols are sanctified and demonized in Northern Ireland's divided society (Buckley, 1998). Stephen Ryan (1991) points out that it was Leo Kuper who first introduced *sanctification* and *demonization* concepts into the field of genocidal studies. Helen Fein (1992) stresses that these processes are different from dehumanisation as they draw on deeper levels of the unconscious mind; thus, identifying the enemy group as the embodiment of evil. Conflicts come to be seen as 'holy wars' where one side is upholding the 'forces of light' against the 'forces of darkness'; they give rise to fantasies of unspeakable horror and ineffable bliss (Kuper, 1989).

For example, Ian Paisley[6] once described the Northern Ireland conflict as one between the *Lamb of God* and the *Whore of Babylon* (Murphy, 1979). Similarly, on 29 January 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush in a State of the Union address, described the Iraqi regime and its allies as an "axis of evil," arming to threaten the peace of the world. Such dualisms and binary oppositions are indicative of sanctification and demonization processes. I painted *Ecce Homo* (Forker, 2006) to express dualistic notions of good and evil (see Figure 6).

6   Dr. Ian Paisley is a senior politician and church leader from Northern Ireland. He is a founding member of and current Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster while also Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party. He has been an outspoken critic of the Roman Catholic faith. In 2005, Paisley's party became the largest Unionist party in Northern Ireland, displacing his long-term rivals, the Ulster Unionists. In May 2007, he became "First Minister" of the newly restored Northern Ireland government at Stormont, Belfast.

Figure 6. Ecce Homo (2006). oil on canvas, 92 x 138cm. Martin Forker. An ET figure mimics the pointing finger of Ian Paisley who is portrayed in an aggressive mode with Bible alongside a Chaplinesque Lambeg drummer surrounded by *Wizard of Oz* characters on a red blood apocalyptic road. The Ulster conflict is seen as a holy war where one side is upholding the forces of light against the forces of darkness.

In another example of sanctification of specific values enforced through narrative arising from the juxtaposition of culturally understood visual symbols that makes clear what is demonic, is the mural *Wanted for Murder,* which refers to a Republican hunger strike in Northen Ireland. On 27 October 1980, an Irish Republican hunger strike for the restoration of "special category status" commenced in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh Prison. The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was intransigent, and refused to recognize the hunger strikers as political prisoners. Ten hunger strikers died. Thus, she became a demonic figure to the Nationalist community (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Wanted for Murder*. Mural located at Hugo Street/ Falls Road, Belfast. Margaret Thatcher is depicted as a demonic vampire with red eyes and bloodstained fangs.

The Politicization of the Madonna

The antithesis of Margaret Thatcher to the Nationalist community is the Virgin Mary. Devotion to Marian imagery is a major conflict issue between Northern Ireland Catholics and Protestants. In his first epistle to Timothy (2:5), St. Paul declares "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Protestants perceive that Catholics mediate through Mary. Catholics retort by claiming that when they refer to the mother of God, they use the word intercessor and not mediator when they speak of Mary.

Similar to the prophetic nature of the banshee, is the more contemporary phenomenon of Marian apparitions which usually contain some sort of divine warning. Such visions usually occur in periods of political turmoil and they are considered divine signs (Christian, 1996).

Interestingly, there was a proliferation of Marian apparitions in Ireland during the 1980s.

There is a strong tradition of Marian devotion within the Catholic/Nationalist community in the Ardoyne district of Belfast. Ardoyne Catholic social consciousness is formed from three interconnected elements; the importance of community, the consciousness and institutionalisation of sectarian identity and republicanism in its broad, cultural sense, rather than a narrow political one. In Catholic districts, Mary is seen as the mother of the family, the community, and of Ireland. For example, Mary's statue is seen being carried by devout Ardoyne parishioners during a Corpus Christi parade in Ardoyne during the 1950s (see Figure 8). Although there is evidence of various murals being dedicated to Queen Elizabeth II, the Queen Mother, and Princess Diana, there is no contemporary Loyalist female personification equivalent to a modern day Britannia which challenges the supremacy of Mary as a motherhood symbol.

Figure. 8: Corpus Christi Parade (1951)

In the Ardoyne Parish 50th anniversary magazine (1951), the following dedication is made: "Carried proudly on the shoulders of her bodyguard, the Queen of Queens looks down upon the welcoming thousands of her people, that day old eyes had tears, they could not well explain young hearts had joy they never dreamed could be, say softly in passing—Mother, Bless Ardoyne."

Aniconic versus Iconic Cultures

In a 1995 Belfast Telegraph newspaper article entitled *All Down to a Difference in Language*, O'Malley suggests that Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics have a different approach to language and imagery. Whilst Protestants are literalists, Catholics are theatrical, providing their congregations with a medieval Baroque cinematic experience. O'Malley states that a former liberal Presbyterian moderator once described Roman Catholics as reading "between the lines," whereas Protestants "read on the lines."

According to Brett (1999), the struggles between Reformation and Counter-Reformation can be viewed as a conflict between iconic and aniconic cultures in which the religious image is the point of keenest focus. The ban upon religious imagery encouraged the creation of secular imagery, an emblematic or symbolic kind that led to great changes in painting. An aniconic cultural strategy is the noticed absence or visible erasure of an image of great symbolic significance. Such a strategy carries as much power as iconic cultural symbols (see Figure 9).

For another example of the use of aniconic strategy, consider the iconic association of woman as container or vessel and the gendering of ships as women. Extending this symbolism, the ill-fated *Titanic* could be interpreted as a representation of a Northern Irish Loyalist female who symbolically embodies political, religious, and sectarian tensions and fissures, since the doomed *Titanic* was built in a Belfast shipyard by Protestant workers.Thus, the creation of films that highlight the sinking of the *Titanic* can be seen as aniconic in that it is the sinking of a symbol of future generations of Loyalists.

Aniconic strategies also employ demonization to sanctify specific values and ideologies. McCaughan (1998) points out that the *Titanic* was a demonological carrier as the ship had enshrined anti-Catholic messages written on it. For example, the *Titanic*'s alleged ship number was 3909 ON, which was written on the side of the ship. This is a mirror image, possibly reflected in the water, of the sectarian slogan *No Pope* (Hayes, 1994). Hence, the Titanic was adopted by Loyalists as a symbol of Ulster Unionist identity, while Catholics regarded it as a symbol of a workplace from which they themselves had been rejected (see Figure 10).

Figure 9. *Armed Loyalists* mural located at Rathgael Estate, Bangor, Co. Down, Northern Ireland. The aniconic emblematic nature of Protestant imagery is exemplified in a mural which depicts Loyalist paramilitaries firing over a UFF clenched fist.

Figure 10. *Titanic* postcard (1912). Permission granted by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra, Northern Ireland.

Celtic Goddesses Symbolism in Motherhood Representations in Loyalist and Nationalist Parties

Meaning through visual binaries of sanctification/demonization, and iconic/aniconic can be seen also in Celtic goddess imagery. Moreover, the same symbol can be associated with different causes and ideologies by the contextual presentation and use of juxtaposition with other symbols. For example, Celtic goddesses are not limited to "the female concerns of procreation and domesticity: they are powerful divine entities; their functions embrace the entire religious spectrum: from warfare to healing; from sovereignty to death; from abundance to destiny; from nourishment to the Otherworld" (Green, 1995, p. 204). Their power arises from their dualism and ambiguity: they can defend and annihilate; heal and curse but also foretell and control life's end. They can be unpredictable and revengeful but also tender and compassionate.

The earliest symbolic female figures associated with Ireland were the figures representing the triple aspects of the central goddess of Celtic mythology (Loftus, 1990). They were guardians of the land and personifications of it. In the 19th century, Protestant female symbols, such as *Truth, Faith*, and *Humanity* became popular and were used by both Catholics and Protestants in Europe. For example, they were employed by the Protestant State and Church in Ireland and Britain to replace and combat Catholic veneration of the Virgin and the other female saints.

Irish female political symbols can be submissive, aggressive, fertile, or sterile. *Mother Ireland* and her entourage are two-faced, beautiful and horrific, subservient and manipulative (Loftus, 1990). Loftus suggests that Protestant symbolism is Catholic symbolism reinvented. For example, there is an affinity between the embracing women in the *Humanity* woodcut and the *Visitation of the Virgin to Elizabeth* imagery popular since the late 12th century. Moreover, the image of *Faith Clutching Her Cross* may be based on Mary Magdalene clasping Christ's cross at the crucifixion. Such Protestant depictions are evident in the martyrdom of the Protestant Margaret Wilson at Solway Firth. Indisputably, *My Faith* is the most dominant of mass-reproduced images in Protestant culture (Loftus, 1990). It references images of Mary Magdalene with a combination of spiritual belief and sexuality.

The role of the ancient divine feminine was to protect the land and its people. Ancient Celtic myths emphasize the dominant role of the female, or at least they point to a society that respected the divine feminine. They combine the maiden, mother, and crone figures that worked together to ensure a cycle of life deriving from the female force. The evolution of these myths suggests a distinct shift in consciousness shaped by the warrior ethos, Christianity and patriarchy. The female goddess, once held sacred, became violent. The Irish goddess is a dual-natured female figure, alternating between beauty and ugliness, in whose gift is great power (Larrington, 1992). The life giver and the life taker collaborated together throughout Celtic lore.

In early Irish tradition the land was personified as a woman with whom the king symbolically coupled for benefit of his people. In the present Northern Ireland conflict, the iconography of ancient Irish goddesses such as Eriu merged with the Irish land can be seen in Belfast street murals. For example, Eriu's image can be seen in the Nationalist Ardoyne area of north Belfast. Written below the mural boldly in the Irish language are the words *Meon an phobail a thogail trid an chultur* or "the people's spirit is raised through culture" (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. *Mural of Eriu*, Flax Street, Ardoyne, Belfast

Eriu was an Irish mythological queen of the Tuatha de Danann (the people of the goddess Danu) slain at the battle of Tailtiunear at Telltown in County Meath in 1698 BCE.

At times of joy or moments of pain, the Irish people would honor Celtic goddesses. Female symbolism formed the most sacred images, and motherhood was the central element of the social fabric woven from Celtic goddess imagery.

Symbols of womanhood in Northern Ireland have long histories of signification and thus are well understood within Irish visual culture (Sawyer, 1993). Use of images of Betsy Gray to denote the sacrifice of life for a cause is such an example (see Figure 12). Lyttle (1968) states that in the Irish Rebellion in 1798, Betsy Gray, a twenty year-old Presbyterian girl mounted on a white horse, dressed in green, and brandishing her sword, led the *Hearts of Down* in a victorious charge on the King's forces at Ballynahinch. Betsy Gray led the pikemen in the front ranks at the battle of Ballynahinch. Later, as she scouted ahead on the road to Lisburn, a cavalryman severed her hand at the wrist with a sabre, and then another two cavalrymen shot her through the head. Betsy Gray epitomized the Irish female warrior.

Figure 12. *Mural of Betsy Gray*, Ballynahinch, Co. Down, Northern Ireland

New versions of female warriors have emerged and their images are transformed into myth. For example, in a political cartoon entitled *The Apotheosis of Bernadette*, Bernadette Devlin achieves political sanctification (Darby, 1983). Devlin, a former Member of Parliament for Mid-Ulster, accused British Home Secretary Reginald Maudling of lying to the House of Commons and of being a "murdering hypocrite" in relation to *Bloody Sunday*, when British soldiers allegedly murdered Catholic protesters in Derry. She then crossed to the floor of the chamber, pulled his hair and struck him in the face. It is this moment of visible denouncement that is the symbol of opposition of Nationalists to British injustice in Ireland.

My Motherhood Imagery

According to Janet Wolff (1983), "Art is a social product" (p. 28). This raises the important question of the artist as a social product of his or her environment. When I was a child, my Catholic grandmother filled my imagination with chilling stories of banshees who would allegedly roam the Catholic Ardoyne district of Belfast. The banshee was a death messenger to ancient Irish families. Indeed, it could be argued that the banshee played a motherly role in her prophecies of imminent death. The banshee was associated with three spirit forms: firstly, Babd, a species of Valkyrie who haunted battlefields, sometimes in the shape of a raven picking at the bodies of the dead with her beak. Babd was the Irish goddess of war, and could influence the outcome of many battles by causing confusion among the warriors with her magical powers. In fact, battle-fields were often referred to as the Land of Badb. Secondly, Morrigan, a nightmare figure, capable of changing her form to beguile the unwary; and thirdly, Bean-Nighe, a pale, slender woman seen washing bloodstained garments in the waters of a river prophesying death in battle (Lysaght, 1996). Female monsters are a common feature of classic Irish lore. For example, vengeful, snatching harpies and sirens lured men to their deaths with deceitful songs. *The Pied Piper of Belfast* depicts the notion of an Irish female Nationalist siren (banshee) luring Irish children to their deaths with Nationalistic music (see Figure 13).
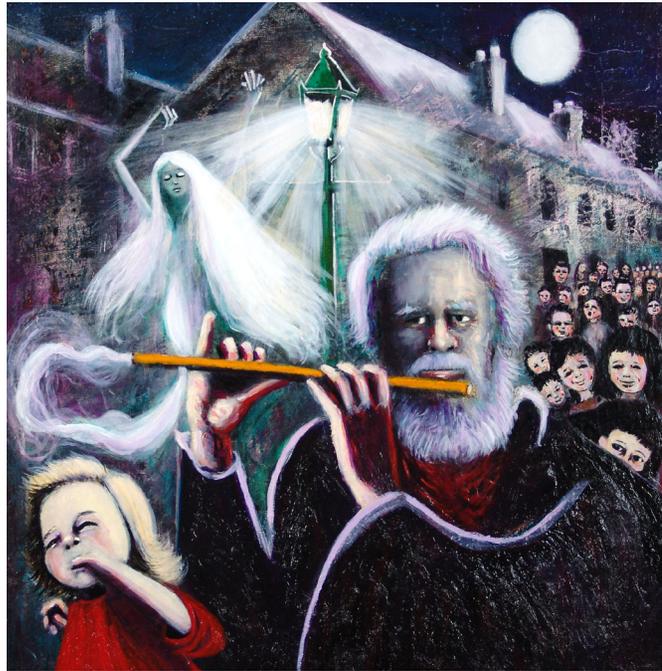
Figure 13. *The Pied Piper of Belfast* (2006). Oil on Canvas, 99 x 91cm. Martin Forker.

The spirit of the banshee is shown emanating from the piper's magical instrument, and reflects the concept of a musical mythomoteur. According to Smith (1997), nations need a 'usable past'—'a golden age' to construct a sense of national identity. Smith (1991) suggests that the myth-symbol complex or mythomoteur is the myth of 'ethnic polity.'[7] Music plays an important role in the symbolic control of public space in Northern Ireland, i.e., the triumphalism of the Orange bands and Irish rebel songs. *The Pied Piper of Belfast* attempts to depict how public recreational space is intensely politicized by Unionists and Republicans in Northern Ireland to promote their own ideologies. In brief, the image attempts to represent how music provides means by which people construct identities and places, the boundaries which separate them, and establish their sovereignty.

The lyrics of the Irish nationalist song *Four Green Fields*[8] inspired the painting of *Mother Ireland* (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. *Mother Ireland* (1975), oil on canvas, 103 x 103 cm. Martin Forker.

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7   Smith (1991) argues that nations must possess common origins and descent. A nation's shared consciousness has to be powerful enough to mobilize itself towards collective goals and ideals, one of whose goals is the ideal of political independence or nationalism. In other words, it indicates the capacity of an ethnic community to express its cultural historicity and its unique sense of self. A mythomoteur is developed over generations, and if it is absent; the community can not define itself and is unable to inspire collective action.

8

  My four green fields ran red with their blood, said she
  What have I now, said the fine old woman
  What have I now, this proud old woman did say
  I have four green fields, one of them is in bondage
  In stranger's hands, that tried to take it from me
  But my sons had sons, as brave as were their fathers
  My fourth green field will bloom once again said she.

If motherhood is sacred, then the nation is sanctified. Such sacredness is exemplified in a poem about *Mother Ulster* by Norman McClelland.[9] *Mother Ireland* is depicted as a banshee type figure lamenting the death of her 'lost' son, Ulster. The image is akin to *Dark Rosaleen* who represents the tormented hearts of Irish women.

Just like *Morrigan* the moon goddess, the image of *Maggie Moon: Mother Ireland* represents the moon as a 'polluted' mother and crone seen in the phases of the full moon, and the waning moon (see Figure 15).
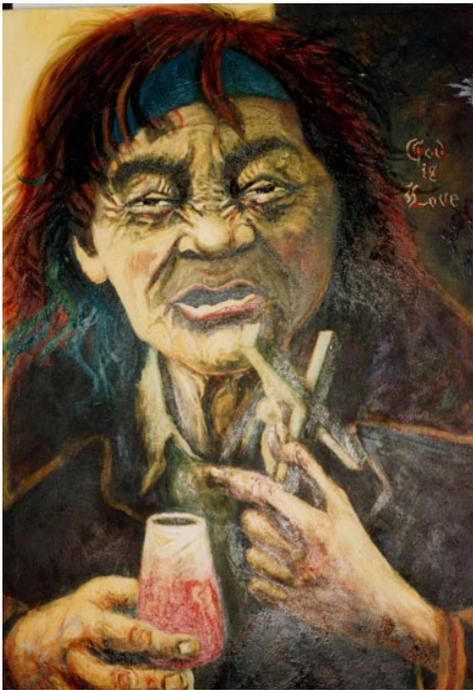
Figure 15. *Maggie Moon/Mother Ireland* (1988). Oil on canvas, 90 x 85 cm. Martin Forker

My intention was to make Maggie Moon a dangerous boundary figure, a hideous figure of pollution rejected by her children and society.

Maggie Moon is depicted as a crone-like destitute mother clutching a wooden cross who is incapable of lamenting her martyred children, and drinks their sacrificial blood. As such, she reflects the ugliness and supremacy of motherhood as a nation: she is the life giver, and the life taker. There is a touch of the carnivalesque in *Maggie Moon*. The image is based upon a 1990s Catholic Belfast beggar woman who was a well-known shoplifter and who solicited stolen goods in order to subsidize her alcohol intake. Unfortunately, when under the influence of alcohol, she would sometimes expose her buttocks to an unsuspecting public. Hence, she gained the moniker of *Maggie Moon*. As such, she is an abject figure. Her anti-social behaviour places her outside the realm of accepted cultural norms—she threatens to reduce culture to chaos through her monstrosity. Akin to Duffy's monstrous *Mother Ulster* personification, *Maggie Moon* is reminiscent of a grotesque mother. Her evident ugliness is evocative of Irish *Sheela-Na-Gig* imagery. Deborah Smith-Shank (2003) points out that a deliberate effort was made to make Sheela-Na-Gigs as grotesque, hideous, and as ugly as possible.

In contrast to *Maggie Moon*, the idealistic image of *The Old Woman of Belfast* is based upon Padriac Pearse's poem *Mise Eire: I am Ireland; I am older than the Old Woman of Beare*. In fact, I used my grandmother, Annie Montgomery, as the model for the painting. According to legend, the *Old Woman of Beare* had seven recurring periods of youth; so that every man who had lived with her came to die of old age. Ultimately, her grandsons and great-grandsons evolved into the various tribes and races of Ireland (see Figure 16).

9

It is you I'll never falter.
Like your mountains Mourne,
Into you we're born
Standing proud we'll never alter
Standing proud in Mother Ulster.

Defend our finest hour.

Figure. 16. *Annie Montgomery: The Old Woman of Belfast* (1988).
Oil on wood, 120 x 120 cm. Martin Forker.

Conclusions

It is evident that female political/ religious representations such as Mother Ireland, the Virgin Mary, Mother Ulster, and Margaret Wilson have a powerful political resonance in Northern Ireland; serving both to unite and divide the community. Motherhood images can be both sanctified and demonized. Motherhood is reconstructed through social experience; and symbolically, through social institutions, and schemes of representation.

It is also apparent that both communities utilize mirrored versions of symbolization since their understanding of politics and religion is dissimilar but based on opposition to each other (Loftus, 1982). This divergence in "seeing" is underscored by the notion of iconic and aniconic cultural strategies of visual culture (Brett, 1999).

It is also manifest that there is a fundamental mimetic rivalry in the symbolization of both communities (Forker, 2002; Girard, 1977). Furthermore, it is apparent that Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant /Loyalist symbolization has its own set of strengths and weaknesses. For example, the Protestant mode of vision to depict the misery of war is commendable; but it reflects an orderly abstraction. Conversely, Catholic imagery's figurative tradition to depict the human condition is appealing, but it tends to focus too much on human suffering and failure.

Furthermore, Loyalist symbols are unambiguous and imperialist, and are concerned with the written word; whereas, Nationalist symbols are ambiguous and personal, and are dependent upon an oral and visual culture. Moreover, it is conspicuous that there is an apparent dearth of contemporary dominant Protestant/Loyalist motherhood personifications. The lack of Queen Elizabeth II, Queen Mother, and Princess Diana imagery as depicted in some Loyalist murals, do not challenge the supremacy of the Virgin Mary as 'Protectress' of Ireland.

Finally, in regards to Wolff's (1983) argument that an artist is the social product of his or her environment, it is evident that my art as a form of social production has been greatly influenced by my exposure to Renaissance/Catholic/Nationalist motherhood imagery during my childhood. Perhaps, this explains my preoccupation with images of suffering motherhood, which underlines the spiritual strength and indomitable

spirit of Irish mothers as exemplified in the image of my own mother, Elizabeth (see Figure 17).
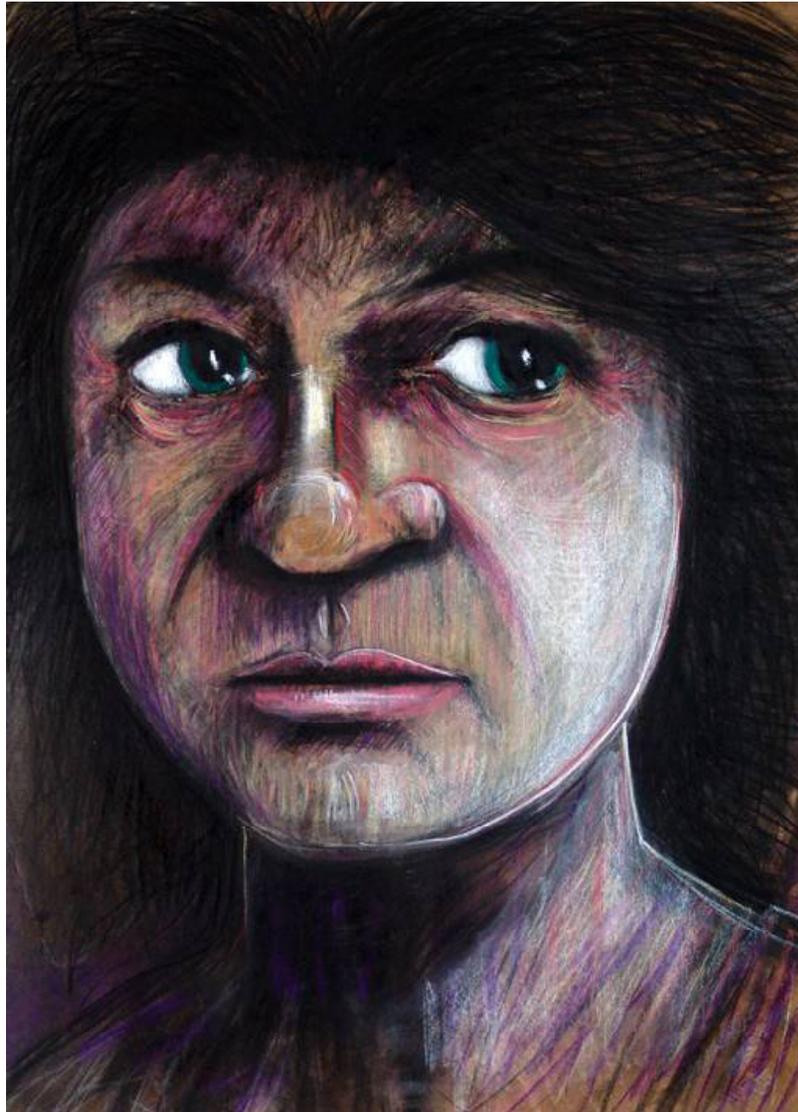
Figure. 17. *Belfast Mother* (1988).
Oil on wood, 120 x 120 cm. Martin Forker.

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About the Author

Martin Forker, Ph.D., is assistant professor in the Applied English Department at Shih Chien University Kaohsiung Campus in Taiwan. He was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and has taught art and art history in several schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In 1990, he received a national art award for his artwork from the Royal Ulster Academy (Invitation Award). Additionally, his artwork has been documented in a significant Irish art history book (Catto, M., *Art in Ulster 2*, 1977) and also in *Circa Art Journal* in the early 1980s. He also has work in the permanent art collection of an Irish museum (Monaghan County Museum). His art reflects the harrowing nature of urban deprivation, homeless people, religious and political conflict and the suffering nature of the innocent victim in divided societies. His doctoral study entitled "A Diagnostic Profile of Art Understandings and Social Attributions Based on Written Responses to Conflict Imagery" was related to the function of symbols in art education. In November 2005, he represented Shih Chien University, Taiwan, at the Peace as Global Language Conference in Sangyo University Kyoto Japan, where he presented an academic paper related to the role of symbols in divided societies.

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