IDENTITY(IES)
A MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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Abstract: The speaker in Fiacha Fola suffers from Hepatitis C, contracted through blood transfusions administered as a medical treatment during pregnancy. Through no fault of her own, her contaminated blood infects her quotidian life. Simple pleasures such as the rituals of courtship or the development of children fall under a grey pall of ill-health. The speaker's campaign to achieve redress in the aftermath of this cruel accident also features prominently. In this mordant collection of nearly 60 poems, a world-weary anger sustains a voice contemplating and commenting on disparity and unfairness that never yields to polemic. The poems consistently contrast the human dimension of women's lives with a bureaucracy struggling to contain and discredit its victims. Drawing on a wide range of references to build solidarity with women across time and cultures, the poems connect powerfully with the patriarchal oppression that pervades women's lives. They reject the stark unceasing conflicts waged on the site of their bodies by opposing ideologies that contribute to a continual
stigmatization of female identity. Referencing the work of feminist critics such as Máire Mhac a’ tSaoi, Susan Sontag, Sherry Ortner and Susan Hogan, this paper explores the ways in which the speaker in the poems recounts a tragedy that invokes ‘shame and guilt in us’ (Mhac a’ tSaoi, 2004: 10) as readers of this powerful work.

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The idea of illness as a metaphor is a compelling one, and one that in forms the collection of poetry *Fiacha Fola* that I will discuss in what follows. According to Susan Sontag, ethnic groups could be seen in terms of contagious diseases (Sontag, 1990: 82). Citing Mary Douglas (1966), she points out that people who pollute are invariably wrong (1990: 136) another idea that pervades this series of poems. I will argue here that such ideas express a kind of stigmatization of female identity. Through patriarchal systems of domination, women are treated as individuals with a compromised identity that resembles the dominant and correct male identity but that differs in some crucial aspects, notably in the power to give birth and to be mothers. This capacity differentiates them from males and marks them as inferior and ultimately unacceptable.

In case it might be thought that I am over-interpreting this idea, it may be as well to give a reminder of the status women have had in Ireland throughout much of the twentieth century, from the establishment of the State in the 1920s until advocacy groups campaigned successfully for change in the nineteen seventies. Women were accorded status as wives, mothers and homemakers in article 41.2 of de Valera’s 1937 constitution, with punitive laws such as the ‘marriage bar’, prohibiting married women from working in the public service and in banks from 1932 to 1973, thus ensuring