

## PAULA MEEHAN'S *CELL*: THE IMPRISONED DIALOGUE OF FEMALE DISCOURSES

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### Abstract

The paper discusses Paula Meehan's play *Cell* with focus on the female discourses present in the context of this literary work and the multifold metaphorisation that both the title of the work and the contents invite. The discourses are analysed against the relevant social background and critical literature. The focal types of discourses under discussion involve imagery from maternal and familiar discourse, the "biological" discourse related to hygiene, the sexual discourse, the mock feminist discourse, the discourse of the military and the propaganda of the common good, and the discourse related to the animal world.

**Keywords:** discourse, feminism, metaphor, Irish studies

### 1. Introduction

Paula Meehan's play *Cell* (cited as *Cell* henceforth) was first staged in 1999 when the most crucial reforms of the Irish penal system began.<sup>1</sup> The reforms of the Irish prisons were unprecedented on that scale since Ireland's independence.<sup>2</sup> In their article "Imprisonment and the Crime Rate in Ireland," O'Sullivan and O'Donnell (2003)<sup>3</sup> argue that "[b]etween 1995 and 1999 [...] the daily average prison population rose by 33 per cent." As pointed out by one of the female characters in Meehan's *Cell* (2000), the rising crime rate was one of the most topical issues during the national elections in the nineties: "DELO: [...] They're voting today. And guess what's the biggest issue in this election?"

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<sup>1</sup> It was in 1999 that The Irish Prison Service came into being and the Prison Authority Interim Board was established to advise it.

<sup>2</sup> In the article "Irish Prisons: Past, Present and Future Challenges," Aylward and Mitchell (2003) notice that under The Prison (Ireland) Act of 1826 Ireland had limited jurisdiction over their prisoners. The Convict Prisons Board of 1854 had the goal to adjust the existing English prison system to the Irish legislation. The Prisons Board existed till 1877, when the General Prisons Board replaced it, and the previous, transitional body was delegalised. The General Prisons Board functioned till 1928, when it was, in turn, incorporated into the Department of Justice. In 1947 the Irish penal system was reformed with "new prison rules" (Aylward & Mitchell 2003) which were applied for a long time.

<sup>3</sup> For the historical background, see also O'Sullivan and O'Donnell (2003) "Imprisonment and the Crime Rate in Ireland."

Crime! Out speciality girruls. I hope you're proud. The papers are full of us. New prisons. That's what the sheep are being promised" (p.18).

New prisons were needed not only because of the rising crime rate but also because the old ones did not meet the European standards. Meehan's play indicates it was high time the measures were to be taken to address the problem of the abominable conditions in which Irish citizens (and non-nationals) were doing the time for their offences. Referring to her visit in 1989 in the older part of the Mountjoy Prison, Christina Quinlan, a Dublin City University academic, and a renowned specialist in the Irish penal system observes that:

the old Panopticon prison that is Mountjoy Prison [was] modelled on Jeremy Bentham's seventeenth century Panopticon model of imprisonment, with its emphasis on light and, work, segregation, surveillance and control [...]. We were appalled and shocked at the conditions within the prison. (Quinlan 2004, p. 65)

"The Report To the Irish Government on the Visit to Ireland carried out by the European Committee For Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment" (1998) points out to overcrowding in Irish prisons (the need for prisons' renovation and "the new facilities for women"), and the need for the better medical care of inmates (the full-time employed doctor and nurses), especially with regard to the mental and psychiatric care (defined "as a matter of urgency"). This is how in her earlier-cited article "A Journey into the Women's Prison," Quinlan (2004) recalls the conditions in Irish women's prison:

At that time women were imprisoned in one wing of St Patrick's Institution [...] 'upgraded' from the old basement of St Patrick's Institution which had served as the women's prison since the 1950s. The prison that women occupied was a corridor of cells on three levels each constructed of cement, steel and wire. (Quinlan 2004, p. 66)

Ironically, new prisons were promised to Irish citizens by A New Ireland's platform. as a "Christmas present." With blatant sarcasm, Meehan makes one of the *Cell's* incarcerated women comment the national election billboard poster visible from her upper prison bunk:

LILA: And I can see the top-half of a lamppost with the election poster with your woman's face on it ... wait a minute ... A New Ireland. Forward to ... something. I can't make it out. (*Cell*, p. 21)

Referring to billboard posters, Anita Schirm (2010) rightly notices that "its main function is attract attention and manipulate. As a cultural medium, however, it both transmits artistic and social phenomena and problems" (Schrim 2010, p. 275). The Irish government kept the deadline for the opening of new prisons for women: "On Christmas Eve 1999, the last of the women from the old female prison in St Patrick's Institution were moved into the Dochas Centre, the new, purpose-built female prison at Mountjoy Prison" (Quinlan, 2004, p. 69).

The study of the reports carried out by the Irish Prison Services, availed to the public annually makes one realise that no matter how drastic the *Cell's* subject might seem at first, its theme is certainly not exaggerated for any dramatic purposes. The issue of drug traffic in Irish prisons, (the female) prisoners' widespread access to any illegal substances, the women's already existing addiction, and the new one, the emotional and physical violence, the sexual abuse of younger women by more hardened criminals, and finally a high suicide rate (see the statistics<sup>4</sup>) – all these pathologies and many other seemed to have lingered on widely at the time when Meehan was writing *Cell*. As regards the specific of female incarceration, Quinlan (2004) elucidates that:

Some of the most striking aspects of female imprisonment in Ireland are the rates of imprisonment, the recidivism among imprisoned women [...] figures published by the Irish Penal Reform Trust estimate current recidivism rates to be in excess of 70% among Ireland's imprisoned women (Quinlan 2004, p.61).

Retrospectively, looking back at the reasons for Irish women's imprisonment, one may notice that:

Throughout the twentieth century huge numbers of women were imprisoned in Ireland for drunkenness, as were one-third of the 1,000 women imprisoned in 1930. Huge numbers were also imprisoned for simple larceny. The next most notable offences in terms of frequency were soliciting, assault and malicious injury to property. No more than three or four women were in prison in Ireland in any year from 1930 to the present day for the crimes of murder or manslaughter. Drug related offences feature in the recorded offences from 1985. (Quinlan, 2004, p.62).

When we compare the causes for female incarceration with the more recent data provided by Quinlan, one can see the changes in the types of the committed offences: some of them appear too trivial to demand detention, like being imprisoned for "not having a bus ticket while travelling on a bus," or "not having a TV licence" (Quinlan 2004, p. 62). On the whole, Quinlan sums up that these days in Ireland

[t]he profile of the women in the women's prisons is radically different from the profile of the men in the male prisons. Where there are 3,000 men in our prisons, many of them committed for serious offences, we have 100 women in the women's prisons committed to prison generally for nuisance-type offences. The population of our women's prison is small and unstable in the sense that women come and go often very quickly from the prison. (Quinlan 2004, p.76)

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<sup>4</sup> For the exact number of the suicide rate in Ireland between 1990 and 2000 see Council Report CR99 "Suicide in Prisons," the Appendix 2, entitled "Prison Suicide Situation in The Republic of Ireland" at [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/files/pdfversion/cr99.pdf](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/files/pdfversion/cr99.pdf)

## 2. The play and its main characters

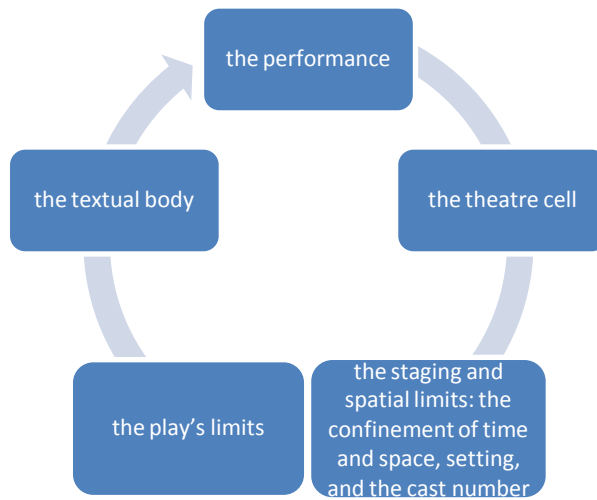
Meehan's *Cell* has four main female characters: a forty two-year-old drug dealer: Dolores Roche, a shop-lifter Martha Casey (sixteen years younger than Roche), a nineteen-year-old drug addict: Lila Byrne, doing time for drug possession – all three from Dublin, and a newcomer into a cell, the oldest of them, convicted for murder Alice Kane from the county Leitrim (*Cell*, p. 5). In other words, Meehan construes in her play a relatively representative cross-section of the contemporary Irish women's community, portraying female prisoners of the three generations, rural and capital city-located, with the previous criminal records, and first time offenders, coming from dissimilar backgrounds and outlooks on life – all facing the enforced confinement in one *cell*. Against their various backgrounds, the individual stories, different personalities, approaches of the main heroines – the imprisoned dialogue of female discourses stands out with textual vividness.

The function of the narrator in *Cell* is assumed by the VOICE, defined by Meehan as a "neutral female" (*Cell*, p. 5), which means allegedly impersonal but not gender-free. When first staged in the City Arts Centre in Dublin, the VOICE was played by the actress Lisa Tierney-Keogh (*Cell*, p. 4). To some extent, The VOICE's aspired neutrality means to balance the play characters' involvement. The VOICE seems to function like the Greek chorus, unified in its outlook and commentary, but also official and indifferent. Repeating the refrain: "Please state your name and the nature of your request" (*Cell*, p. 47), the VOICE sounds like a dehumanised (penal) machine rather than a live and caring being.

## 3. Discourses in *Cell*

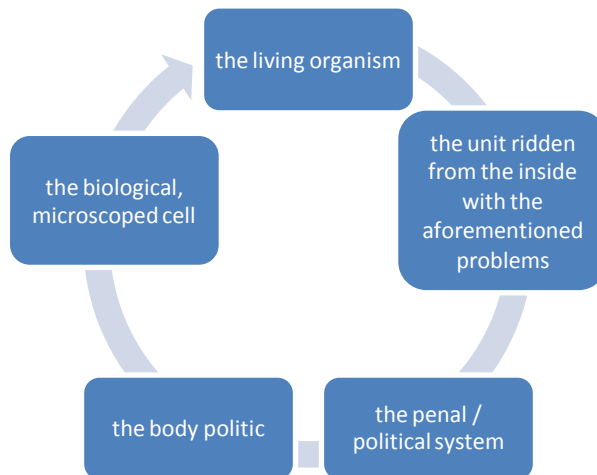
### 3.1 The discourse of the biological cell

In *Cell*, Meehan (2000) examines discourses of female imprisonment in the context of the textual confinements of the spatially restricted prison *cell*. To some extent, the theatre, functions as a perfect *Cell* in all the above-mentioned dimensions. As illustrated below, the symbolism of the cell - the theatrical stage limitations works well on many levels. The limitations can be related to the performance, the textual body, the theatre cell, the play's limits, the staging and spatial limits, i.e. the confinements of time and space, setting, and the cast number, cf. Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1:** The cell as ...

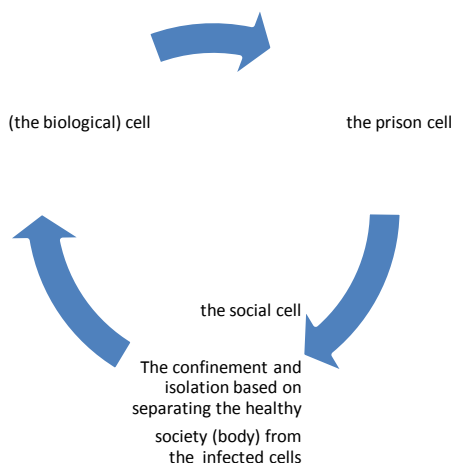
Following this line of thinking, Meehan's titled play's signifier amounts to the biological *cell* of the living organism / political system / the state / body politic, an integral part of the larger social whole, ridden from the inside with the collective problems, cf. Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2:** The cell as ...

### 3.2 The crime discourse as an infectious virus in the healthy social cell

Considering the above, on a metaphorical level, “the prison is the reverse image of the society, an image turned into a threat” (Foucault 1994a, p. 85). Sarcastically, Dolores Roche remarks: “We’re their worst nightmare. They want us keep well off the streets. Make them safe for peace and reconciliation” (*Cell*, p. 18). In Meehan’s play, the alleged corruption of female convicts is depicted as being perceived as the viral contamination of the supposedly “healthy” part of the society, cf. Fig. 3.

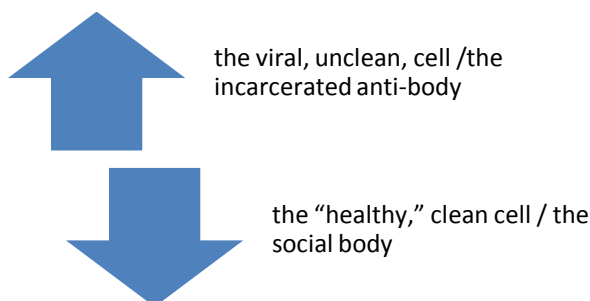


**Fig. 3**

Hence, the “healthy” Irish society is supposed to be separated and protected from the “diseased,” “viral,” sick part of the criminals (compare “Disenfranchised. Disgraced. And disgusted” as cited below). An expression “A clean slate” functions like a counterbalance to the earlier implied un-cleanness and the potential evil of female prisoners.

DELO: (...) Us criminals forfeit the right to vote. Did you know that Alice? Disenfranchised. Disgraced. And disgusted. Eh Lila? There’s no one running on a general amnesty ticket. That’s who I’d vote for. If I had one. Open the prison doors wide. A clean slate. Start from scratch. (*Cell*, p. 37).

Hence, the incarcerated *cell* is viewed as infected with the criminal virus that disrupts the “healthy” social functioning. As demonstrated by Foucault in his works, the double-edged character of prison serves to mask the fact that other social bodies are also founded on the premises not less normalising and disciplining than those referring to incarceration.

**Fig. 4**

As demonstrated earlier, the binary opposition of the “clean” and “unclean” social divisions can be organised around the medical discourse of infection, viruses<sup>5</sup> and diseases.<sup>6</sup> With regard to Irish prisons, Long and others indicate the use of injected drugs and the previous, or longer imprisonment – as the most decisive factors increasing the risk of the HIV or HPV infection<sup>7</sup>. The conclusions of the Report are summed up as follows: “Use of injected drugs and infection with hepatitis C are endemic in Irish prisons [...]. Only a small number of first time entrants were infected with one or more viruses” (Long at al. 1999). What is more, the viral gender bordering of the prison and society, compartmentalises and labels women as more likely female “anti-bodies” than male “bodies.”<sup>8</sup> In Meehan’s *Cell*, “viral” implies being “less powerful” and more docile. “The clean” detainees, like Dolores Roche, have the unquestionable power over the HIV or HPV positive female convicts, cf. the virus-in-the-cell metaphor in Fig. 5.

<sup>5</sup> The Report “Prevalence of antibodies to hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV and risk factors in entrants to Irish prisons: a national cross sectional survey” (1999) issued by Jean Long at al., was conducted in “five out of seven committal prisons in the Republic of Ireland” with the number of 607 recruits remaining in the programme.

<sup>6</sup> The survey was conducted during the time of April the 6<sup>th</sup> till May the 1st of 1999.

<sup>7</sup> The percentage of the antibodies of hepatitis B was 6%, hepatitis C was 22%, HIV was 2%. The authors of the report indicate the usage of the drugs as the determining factor in the high figures of the tested programme. The injected drug users would amount to 29% of all surveyed in the programme. Their rate of antibodies was the highest: the antibodies of hepatitis B was 18%, hepatitis C antibodies was 72%, HIV antibodies was 6%. 40% of all injecting drug users were recidivists, in the group of the first time offenders only 7% had any previous contact with drugs. For the first time prisoners (30% of the surveyed) the number of the antibodies was 2%, hepatitis C was 3%, the HIV antibodies were not detected in that group at all (Long at al.).

<sup>8</sup> What seems stunning in the aforementioned study is how the gender factor affects the rate of the tested antibodies. The survey states that: “The proportion of women prisoners reported ever injecting drugs was higher than in men (63% v 27%)” (Long at al. 1999). The Report proves that compared with men, women were almost three times more likely to test positive hepatitis B core antibodies, seven times more likely to test positive for hepatitis C antibodies, and almost ten times more likely to test positive for the HIV antibodies (Long at al. 1999).

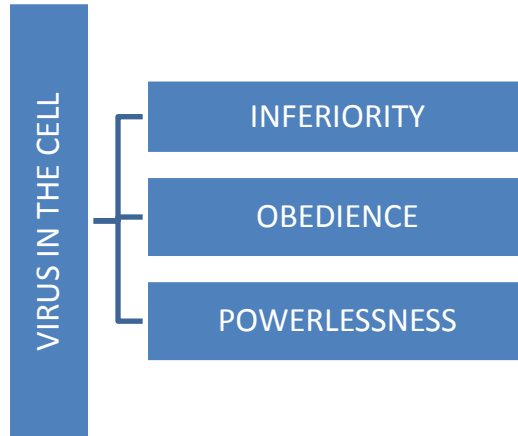


Fig. 5

### 3.3 The basic hygiene discourse

Dolores Roche's rationale for her self-legitimised leadership in the *cell* and superiority over other female inmates is being "clean" from serious viral infections. Roche expresses her views openly: "Your blood Lila – riddled with the virus. Oh yes. Riddled. Look. *Delo pushes Lila's head into bucket*" (*Cell*, p. 12). Martha admits as well "The virus is your cells – invisible. Working away quietly. All the time." (*Cell*, p. 56). One of the non-negotiable rules laid by Dolores is connected with the "basic hygiene" (*Cell*, p. 9) discourse: disposing of the faeces and menstrual blood into the plastic bags, not leaving the women's bodily waste, (apart from urine), in the shared by all bucket.

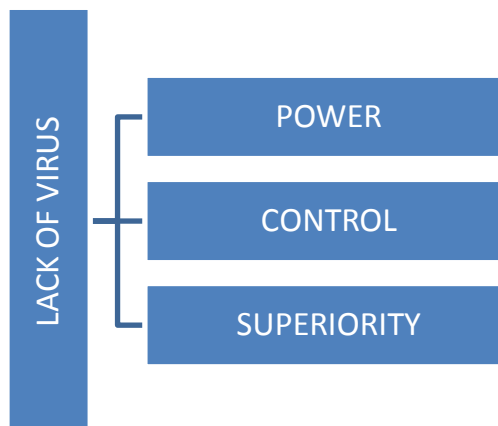


Fig. 6



According to Dolores, the bodily discharges of her infected female inmates put others' life in danger:

DELO: Now. We had a pact. Right? Don't interrupt! No blood. No faecal matter, or shit as it's known to you scumbags. A co-pi-ous supply of plastic bags in there. Couldn't be easier. This day and age. The big V. It makes sense. You know it does. Lila? Martha? Mar? Lila? It's the principle of the thing, really. A pact. A solemn promise. For the health of all. The good of the many. Basic hygiene. You do see? (*Cell*, p. 9)

Ironically, it is injected drugs that Roche distributes all over the prison that constitute the most blatant violation of her "basic hygiene rule" and the real threat to the health and life of female prisoners. Due to the regular supply of drugs to imprisoned addicts (her own cell mates being given priority in this procedure), Delo sets the rules for all women in her cell.

Repeating Dolores's words, Lila explains the "basic hygiene" discourse to the *cell* newcomer, Alice: "It's to cut down on the chance of infection. From the virus like" (*Cell*, p. 26). Roche's insistence upon the "basic hygiene" procedure betrays her understanding "of hygiene as a regime of health for populations [that] entails a certain number of authoritarian medical interventions and controls" (Foucault 1994 b, p. 99). In other words, Delo uses the discourse of hygiene to exert the power and get advantage from the fact of being uninfected. Very much in Foucauldian fashion, Roche applies the "hygiene" regime" as an instrument of punishment and control over other female prisoners. Lila recalls how Dolores bullied Annie who committed a suicide: "She was always going on about the smell. She made Annie wash down the whole cell twice a day" (*Cell*, p. 22). What is more, Dolores's obsessive fear of the infected female bodily waste seems to hint at a broader problem, perceiving the female body itself as the contaminated *cell*. Not complying with Roche's "basic hygiene" discourse involves punishment: "She made us stand in our bare feet for thirty bleeding hours" (p. 23). This is just a milder example of the penalty exercised by Dolores upon her insubordinate inmates.

### 3.4 The military and the propaganda discourse

As argued earlier, the women's prison discourses are employed to "incarcerate" *cell* inmates and keep them under control. In her above-cited speech (*Cell*, p. 9), Dolores uses the discourse of the military (see "pact" and "The big V") and the (political) propaganda ("For the health of all. The good of the many"). Pretending to ask for the listeners' approval ("Right?") and appealing to the shared common sense logic ("It makes sense. You know it does," "Couldn't be easier," "It's the principle of the thing, really"), what Roche tries to communicate is her own interests and her own safety. What is more, Roche's discourse betrays overt disdain and disrespect for female inmates ("shit as it's known to you scumbags" "Don't interrupt!"). Being a mixture of indoctrination and manipulation, Roche's speech (*Cell*, p. 9) aims at intimidating female convicts to assure their complicity, cf. Table. 1.

<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan's play</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
<i>military</i>	<i>Pact</i> <i>The big V</i> <i>When I say jump, I mean jump.</i> <i>Don't interrupt!</i> <i>I am the longest serving faithful servant</i>	war on viruses	commands threats terror intimidation	assure obedience and complicity  break potential resistance
<i>the propaganda of the common good</i>	<i>For the health of all.</i> <i>The good of the many</i> <i>It makes sense. You know it does,</i> <i>It's the principle of the thing, really</i>	common good common sense logic	appeals appellation demanding approval indoctrination	secure one's own interests

Table. 1

Taking all into account, in order to distribute drugs all over the prison, Dolores needs the co-operation of her *cell* inmates in her business. When Martha reports her “Fourteen orders” (*Cell*, p. 16), Roche praises her with words “Well done, o faithful servant” (*Cell*, p. 16). The fragment below illustrates in more detail how Dolores Roche reinforces her superior position in the *cell* group:

MARTHA: Leave me alone. I'm in the middle of a dream.

DELO: I'm getting to the bottom of this. Martha Casey, get out of that bed.

MARTHA: It's too cold. Go away.

DELO: When I say jump, I mean jump. (*Cell*, p. 8)

The citation proves that Roche does not hesitate to resort to physical violence (“*drags Martha out of the bed by her hair*”) and to use the categorical orders and uncompromising commands, in the military jargon style (“When I say jump, I mean jump.”). She neither wishes nor seems able to tolerate any forms of disobedience (“I'm getting to the bottom of this”) that could defy her authority in the *cell*. Roche justifies her power usurpation with the longest period of the internment (still three years remaining to do out of seven), demanding the privileges from her illegitimate headship.

DELO: At any second we could be joined by a fourth person. So technically the cell is fairly divided. Couldn't be fairer. And since I am the longest serving member of the club – four years I've resided here – I figure a couple of perks in order. (*Cell*, p.75)

In the *cell* run by Roche, two inmates were found dead, because of suicide or overdose of the drugs provided by her. The unrevealed circumstances of their deaths were connected with their attempted resistance to Dolores's authority. Annie and Lila were both physically and emotionally tormented by Roche, which indirectly contributed to their demise. Before taking her own life, Lila warned Alice about Dolores: "You don't know her. She killed Annie. As good as killed her .... She drove her to kill herself" (*Cell*, p. 44). In the Council Report CR99 "Suicide in Prisons,"<sup>9</sup> in the Appendix devoted to "Prison Suicide Situation in The Republic of Ireland," researchers state that in the year 1999, with what they define as "average daily population" at the level of 2763, with 11000 admissions, in Ireland there were 6 suicide deaths of the sentenced prisoners and 2 on remand. However, as they remark "[t]hese figures do not include deaths from overdose, which have amounted to 1/2 year."

### 3.5 A mock-feminist discourse

In Meehan's play, a self-acclaimed *cell* leader Roche does not care about the deaths of her inmates, but to avoid accountability or guilt, she rationalises the suicides as being a doomed decision of the weak, emotionally unbalanced drug addicts. Cynically travestyng feminist slogans ("A woman's right to choose"), Roche denies any liability for contributing to the women's suicidal deaths, either by drug supply or by bullying:

DELO: Then Annie died. By her own hand, let it be said. She chose. A woman's right to choose. That's a motto of mine. Look at you now. You've let yourself go. Big time. (*Cell*, p. 34)

<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan's play idiom</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
<i>mock feminist</i>	<i>A woman's right to choose. That's a motto of mine.</i>	feminist empowerment	slogans	denying being co-responsible

Table. 2

<sup>9</sup> According to the authors of "Prison Suicide Situation in The Republic of Ireland," from the beginning of the 1990s till 2000s, in 1996 and in 1999 the total number of suicide prison deaths in The Republic of Ireland was 8 (in other years, it was lower). They admit that "[t]here is no obvious explanation for the steady state of the suicide rate in the Irish prisons compared with British prisons." After The National Group on Deaths in Prisons in Ireland, they record the Irish prisons' overcrowding, "a very high ratio of prison officers to prisoners," "reasonable access to visits," the rise in the "average daily population" and reproach "a serious lack of therapeutic resources."

### 3.6 The family and the maternal discourse

What is more, defining herself as a “mama sow,” Dolores Roche seems to assert authority for her self-usurped position of the *cell* matriarch, claiming to be “the mother figure” to younger female inmates. What she draws upon here is a subverted model of Mother Ireland: abusing and exploiting her “daughters.” Being manipulative and aggressive towards her offspring, such a “mother,” claims to be well-motivated and act in her children’s good:

DELO: (...) Listen to me Lila. This is all for your own good. Chastisement. Forges character. You don’t want to end up a spineless blubber of mush. It hurts me more than it hurts you etcetera etcetera etcetera. You find that strange. Believe me. I’m older and wiser than you. I know my way around this system. You think I like coming the heavy? That I enjoy it? You have to wise up. (*Cell*, p. 34)

In her speech (p.34), Dolores wishes to convince nineteen-year-old Lila that she means well for her even when she beats her up to pulp. In doing so, she uses the linguistic strategies to establish the emotional connection with an addressee and earn her trust (“Listen to me Lila,” “Believe me,” “You have to wise up,”). Using physical and emotional violence against Lila is supposed to be motivated by Roche’s pedagogical care about a younger convict (“This is all for your own good. Chastisement. Forges character.”). Dolores tries to get Lila’s complicity by appealing to her alleged wisdom and experience (“I’m older and wiser than you. I know my way around this system.”). Feigning her sincere concern about Lila’s future (“You don’t want to end up a spineless blubber of mush”), Roche attempts to veil aggression as her own sacrifice for Lila’s good (“You think I like coming the heavy? That I enjoy it?”).

The bitter irony of these utterances comes from them being phrased as rhetorical questions, not expected to be answered by anybody. The imprisoned women are aware that Roche manipulates the vulnerable, inexperienced female inmates to secure connivance and collaboration. The tragi-comical effect is achieved in the line “It hurts me more than it hurts you etcetera etcetera etcetera,” whose cynical message gets dissolved in the meaningless repetition of the unfinished, senseless sentence.

<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan’s play idiom</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
<b>maternal familial</b>	<i>mama sow</i> <i>Tried to lie to Mama.</i> <i>Have I not been like a mother to both of you?</i> <i>Martyred I am.</i> <i>We were like a family</i> <i>We only had each other.</i> <i>I’m older and wiser than you.</i>	well-motivated act in her children’s good pedagogical care family care	violence manipulating emotional needs	set cell the hierarchy discipline and control stifle defiance

<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan's play idiom</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
	<i>We had something special, really special.</i>			

Table 3

As demonstrated earlier, what Roche is drawing upon is a pathological discourse of motherhood, according to which, brutality and affection accompany each other and are considered as synonymous. She unscrupulously uses the knowledge about her cell mates' family script so keep the girls under her control. It is likely to assume that young juvenile delinquents, addicts, thieves, living in the street, have not experienced sustaining relations with their mothers and other family members. Lila recalls her short stay at the grandmother (who died soon) as her best childhood memory (*Cell*, p. 28). Martha's recollections are much worse than that: her mother used to sell herself and her daughter's body to anybody willing to pay: "Ms Casey is not just the vernacular! Her mother would let anybody do her for a fiver" (*Cell*, p. 75). Playing upon this traumatic experiences, Roche wishes to create an illusion of the close-knit *cell* connections to give them "maternal care" they have had before. Hence, the deceptive performance of emotional closeness is the second type of drugs that Roche "trades" to *cell* inmates to dominate them. Dolores defines her philosophy as a "fair trade. Hasn't it always been the motto. The family motto so to speak. Have I not been like a mother to both of you? Ingrates?" (*Cell*, p. 10). This is how Roche comments upon the *cell* "family" relations: "Martha and me and Lila – we had something special, really special" (*Cell*, p. 83). Elsewhere, after Lila's death, she assures:

DELO: No. Hear me out. I *did* love that young one. We were like a family. Who have I? Eh? Answer me that? Who have I? Me boys? They wouldn't know me from Adam. We only had each other. We only *have* each other. (*Cell*, p. 65), emphasis original

In other words, Dolores wishes to promote her self-image in the *cell* as a maternal figure to the younger women, manipulating their emotional needs to make them dependent upon her. Roche's successful demand-supply management visibly betrays weaknesses of the Irish penal system: incarcerated women being left on their own, prone to be victimised by their more deprived inmates. Faced with the lack of efficient rehab programmes,<sup>10</sup> the imprisoned women come up with their own "hidden meaning" version of the penal correction behavioural therapy. Accordingly, Roche is conjuring up for them the make-believe textual discourse of closeness ("we had something special, really special"), neediness and support ("We only had each other. We only *have* each

<sup>10</sup> In her article, Quinlan enumerates several programmes in which she either took part herself or knew of, such as AVP: Quaker-run Alternatives to Violence, a Prion Summer School, Pathways organization, Volunteer Befriending etc

other.), the relational familial bonds (“We were like a family”), loyalty and honesty (“fair trade. Hasn’t it always been the motto”), fairness (“the cell is fairly divided. Couldn’t be fairer”), and women’s friendship [“our friendship means nothing?” (*Cell*, p. 70)]. All in all,

The prison conveys two messages: “This is what society is. You can’t criticize me since I only do what you do every day at the factory and the school. So I am innocent. I’m only the expression of a social consensus.” That is what we find in penal theory and criminology: prison is not so unlike what happens every day. At the same time, though, prison conveys a different message: “The best proof that you’re not in prison is that I exist as a special institution, separated from the others, meant only for those who have committed a violation of the law.” (Foucault, 1994 a, p.85)

What is more, in gendered language, for incarcerated women, the family discourse plays a similar role to that the army jargon and its hierarchy does in men’s prisons. That shows that both family structures and army operate on the similar assumptions: having their own codes, loyalties, connections, hierarchies etc., and coercive methods by the means of which they discipline and control its members (relatives/soldiers). In this vein, the incarcerated women produce in *Cell* the sheer travesty of the aspired by them values.

### 3.7 The sexual discourse

On the whole, sadistic and bossy Roche extorts all kinds of needed services (including sexual ones) from her inmates. She does it either in a give-and-take for drug supplies, or by bullying, beating them up, or issuing verbal threats. In her pathological understanding of the family, Dolores (mother) does not seem to have objections to having sex with her “daughter” Lila. The youngest and the most attractive of the *cell* female prisoners, Lila tends to be sexually abused by Roche, who regularly enforces sexual behaviour from her (“DELO: Here. We are taking payment. Fair exchange being no robbery”).

DELO: (...) I perceive my girlies want to cuddle up. Amn’t I right?,

LILA: Please...

DELO: (...) Pleeese. On your knees soon. No dope today girlies”

(*Cell*, p. 11)

In Meehan’s *Cell*, the sexual act is performed in a coercive way, Lila is not physically attracted to Dolores, she finds Roche repulsive. Regardless of all, Dolores gives orders Lila to satisfy her sexually. Giving instructions and waiting to get orgasm, Roche does nothing to return pleasure to Lila. There is no affection, desire or mutuality in the sexual contact between these two inmates. Delo is a passive recipient and Lila is a giver: their roles are strictly assigned and non-negotiable. Roche administers her bodily payment as an act of submission, Lila’s inability to refuse seems to additionally excite Delo. Roche accepts it as an expression of her absolute power over her *cell* inmates:

*Delo goes to unused bank. Lies back and beckons Lila over. Lila begins to fondle Delo. Brings her to climax. As this happens –*

DELO: Snuggle in there. Oh yes. That's the spot. X marks the spot. Sex marks the spot. O I like it that. There. That's good. And Snakey likes it too! Talking down the neck of her sweatshirt. You like that don't you Snakey. Yes. Yes. Faster now. Hi ho hi ho off to work we go, go, go, go. Snakey loves it. Yes. Lovely. Lovely. Lovely. (*Cell*, p. 15)

All in all, the idiom in which Dolores provides the sexual instructions to Lila is carried out in imperative commands: ("Snuggle, Faster now, That's good etc"). The reference to the tattooed snake on Roche's body might imply the patriarchal schizophrenia according to which female sexuality is seen as sinful (see the Gospel serpent). On the whole, the sexual act amounts to rape. Like rapists, Roche expects her victims to pretend that they enjoy being sexually violated: "DELO: (...) Innocent yang thang. Do you like that? (*Opens her shirt and begins to sex her up*) You do. You like it. Are you getting jealous Martha? Mammy loves her little titties" (*Cell*, p. 19). In other words, Roche wishes her inmates who prostitute for drugs to pretend the satisfaction from the unwanted sexual contacts with her. She enforces not only the sexual submission but also a declarative one: "Who's my girl?," "That's nice, isn't it?," "Who's your best pal?." (*Cell*, pp. 15 -16). Answering these questions is additionally degrading to sexually enslaved Lila, as she has to further humiliate herself to lie about a degrading situation. Such a torture is likely to evoke in Lila disgust not only to the oppressor (MARTHA: Lila...couldn't stand the stink of you. She bleached her fingers after you....She killed herself rather than put up with the smell of you" (*Cell*, p. 72) but also to herself and her own body.

<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan's play idiom</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
<i>sexual</i>	<i>my girlies want to cuddle up On your knees soon Snuggle in there Sex marks the spot Yes. Yes. Faster now. Yes. Lovely. Lovely. Lovely. You do. You like it. That's nice, isn't it?</i>	sexual satisfaction of both	buying sex for drugs blackmail violence bulling threats commands	sexual satisfaction of the recipient assuring domination through sex

**Table 4**

### 3.8 The animal discourse

Apart from the military and pathological family discourse (see “Mammy loves her little titties”), the idiom that Roche applies most frequently and willingly in relation to her female cell inmates is the animal discourse.<sup>11</sup> In the play’s opening that is how Roche addresses two other imprisoned women from her *cell*:

DELO: Rise and shine, little piggies. Mama sow has a bone to pick. A bone to pick? A bone to chew! With one of you. (*Cell*, p. 7)

Along the animal conceptual metaphors, Roche refers to incarcerated women in the *cell* as “little piggies,” and dogs (“bone to chew”),<sup>12</sup> “A dog. A fucking dog” (p. 29), “doggy woggy here, woof woof. Thanks Delo, says Doggy” (p. 71), “It’s the dog eat dog out there” (p. 69), “sleeve bitch...Slither in the grass” (p. 33). Alice talks about Dolores as having “The look you’d get in a dog that goes prowling lambs at night” (p. 43). Roche complains that “I’m surrounded by snakes in the grass” (p. 74), “Snake in the grass” (C59), and then speaking of the “Lamb to the slaughter” (p. 12), “I’m surrounded by puddycats” (p. 17). Giving Lila drugs is defined by her as “feeding the monkey” (p. 13), Delo threatens the addict: “You don’t work, monkey doesn’t get fed” (p. 13). Martha apologises to Lila for “ratting on” her (p. 23). Giving sex to Roche is referred to as pleasing Snakey: “Come to Snakey. Come on. Snakey wants you” (p. 32). Roche calls herself a cell “mama sow.” Considering the above, Dolores textually depicts her inmates as animals, in its culturally derogative way: swine (dirty, filthy), dogs (subordinate and submissive), monkey (senseless and foolish), snakes (cunning, treacherous, disloyal), lambs (victims, human sacrifices).

DELO: And she expects me to keep her monkey fed. What am I – the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals? Never-ending source of peanuts? For her greedy monkey? (*Cell*, p.13)

<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan’s play idiom</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
<i>animal</i>	<i>little piggies</i> <i>bone to chew</i> <i>A dog. A fucking dog</i> <i>Thanks Delo, says</i> <i>Doggy</i> <i>sleeve bitch...Slither in</i> <i>the grass</i>	the non-human ways of the world	Animal metaphors	denying one’s humanity humiliation justifying abuse and violence

<sup>11</sup> See Kirkpatrick, K. (2010). “Between country and city: Paula Meehan’s ecofeminist poetics.” In Ch. Cusic (Ed.), *Out of the earth: ecocritical readings of Irish texts* (pp. 108-126). Cork: Cork University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Compare the earlier cited “The country’s gone to dogs” (p. 37).



<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan's play idiom</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
	<i>snakes in the grass</i> <i>Lamb to the slaughter</i> <i>Puddycats</i> <i>feeding the monkey</i> <i>monkey doesn't get fed</i> <i>Snakey wants you</i> <i>greedy monkey</i> <i>the sheep are being promised</i>			

Table 5

### 3.9 The post(human) discourse and the revival of humanistic one

The detention discourses are the language of post(humanity): the Irish prison depicted in Meehan's play represents the non-human reality. Kathryn Kirkpatrick (2010) notices that

Paula Meehan presents four Irish women whose only access to the nonhuman world of nature is through a prison window.... Delo dominates and exploits her younger cell-mates by using their drug addictions to force them to perform sexual favours and smuggle messages. Making use of the nonhuman in the same way she makes of humans, Delo dissociates herself from her most brutal acts of violence towards her cell-mates by calling on Snakey, a large tattooed on her arm, to terrorise them: her cell-mates, on the other hand, display a marked sensitivity to the natural world. (*Cell*, p. 108)

It is only after the arrival of Alice, a simple country woman who acts upon long forgotten in Dolores-controlled *cell* rules of decency and fairness that a new quality is introduced to the incarcerated women's lives. The message of hope that Kane brings with herself to the prison becomes the challenge to the terror and cruelty established by Roche. Alice cares about Lila and Martha and wishes to set them free from Dolores's corruptive influence. Aware of that, Roche treats Kane as a contender who needs to be taught her place in the *cell* hierarchy. But acting upon a moral code Alice cannot be subdued, bribed or easily placated. With her philosophy of love, and clear division between good and evil, Alice manages to defy Roche's power. Kane, a mother devoted to her children, bestows real, and not manipulative, maternal affection over female inmates in the *cell*.

ALICE: Now child. It's coming to Christmas. It's a very sad time for all of us. We're all mothers. My sons gone from me. Your jasmine away from you. All the lost children. There's enough grief in this prison to drown the whole city. (*Cell*, p. 69)

It is precisely on the authority of motherhood discourse that Kane challenges Roche, making the *cell* inmates reveal Dolores's secret: the drugs that she sells killed her own children. "Yes! Killed them. As good as. Overdose. Suicide. Who gave them the gear? Who got them started on the stuff? Now. Take your filthy hands off me" (*Cell*, p. 73). And she concludes: "you're steeped in death. It hangs around you like a cloud" (*Cell*, p. 73).

As demonstrated above, the arrival of Alice re-introduces the balance of justice and harmony in the imprisoned women's lives. The blatant irony stems from the fact that Kane is convicted for murder that she really committed. Hence, in the eyes of the law, she is supposed to be the most corrupted and evil of all inmates in the *cell*. Meehan's sarcastic distance to this assumption is brilliantly rendered in the derisive passage below, mocking both the gender (incorrect ending of the murderer/murderess) and criminal stereotypes:

MARTHA: Wait for it. A murder.

DELO: You mean a murderess.

MARTHA: What? That's what I heard anyway. She stabbed a guy. Dead.

DELO: A real criminal at last. Thank God. I'm surrounded by puddycats.

MARTHA: (*Smoking*) I feel human again. (*Cell*, p. 17)

The conversation's self-ironic ending "I feel human again" uttered by Martha may have many meanings. On one hand, in comparison to a murder convict, a shop-lifter experiences a sort of moral superiority (hence gaining an upper hand in the scale of "humanity,"). On the other hand, after being compared by Roche to the animal, Martha begins to realise her personhood. However, what seems most foreshadowing Casey's future fate: due to Alice's help, Martha is going to "feel human," clean of drugs and able to experience attachment to her children.

Alice, (the bogwoman, as she is dismissively labelled by Dubliners from the *cell*), turns out to be the only one who successfully defies Dolores's authority. Calling younger women in *cell* daughters, she does everything to protect them against Roche's abuse, literally everything – including taking on herself the killing of Dolores. Alice supports Martha in her plans to regain the custody over her daughter Jasmine and "come clean" (p. 59) of drugs. Due to Kane's care, Casey seems likely to overcome her addiction and go through the rehabilitation process. However, not wanting to lose an accomplice in the drug business, Roche by trickery pushes Martha back into addiction. It was after this drug incident that the fight between them began, ending with Dolores being stabbed.

<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan's play idiom</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
<i>humanistic</i>	<i>I feel human again All the lost children. We're all mothers. There's enough grief in this prison to drown the whole city.</i>	none	pity compassion love	regain one's humanity

<i>The type of discourse</i>	<i>Meehan's play idiom</i>	<i>Pretended aim</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Real aim</i>
	<i>Will nobody help us?</i>			

Table 6

The similar scenario happened earlier to Alice Kane; in self-defence, she stabbed a man who was harassing her for a long time, intimidating with threats, slaying her dog and making threats to her own life. The man was Alice's neighbour who wanted to seize her land she inherited after her husband's death. Before the murder, Alice sought help from the local authorities, politicians, etc. – but nobody wanted to help her. Martha comments about Kane's situation as follows: "Bastards. Doctors and cops and priests and fucking teachers. All fucking bastards" (*Cell*, p. 57). Alice could add to this list lawyers and MPs who failed her as well. So did the penitentiary services. When Lila was dying, nobody called a doctor. One may conclude the exclamation that Kane's screams when she fears about Casey's life: "Will nobody help us?" (*Cell*, p. 87).

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up, cliché and naïve as it may be to blame the system (society?), for the failures and wrongdoings of particular individuals, one cannot turn a blind eye to the helplessness and solitariness of the incarcerated women depicted in Meehan's drama. Like Quinlan, Meehan also worked voluntarily with women in Irish prisons, and she got to know their problems well. That is why her play neither suggests a way out, nor does it give some easy hope. *Cell* terminates with a narcotic vision of the New Prison, resembling the paradise-like reality ["Robinson's New Ireland reality is as hidden from her as Eden itself" (Kirkpatrick 2010, p.108), uttered by a raving Martha, just after killing Dolores. Hence, unnecessary violence seems to escalate and no new edifices appear likely to, by magic, quickly solve this vicious circle's entanglement. In Meehan's *Cell*, women are "imprisoned" not only by gender, social and criminal stereotypes but also, or above all, by the discursive power of language, as it is applied against them. The language used by Meehan clearly demonstrates its actional power<sup>13</sup>, the fact that words are operative in creating and maintaining the network of social relations.

Perceived from such a perspective, prisons may be seen as much more than simply "a general means of punishment" or "the essential core of the entire penal system" (Foucault 1994c, pp. 224-225). Indeed, one begins to notice that "to get a better understanding of what is punished and why, ...[one has to] ask the question *how* does one punish?" (Foucault 1994c, p. 224). Those questions, together with the questions

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Witczak-Plisiecka 2013a, 2013b for an overview of relevant literature and discussion; Poloczek 2010 for an account of injurious speech acts.

concerning linguistic construal of reality, precisely need to be considered when having a closer look at the examined play.

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<sup>14</sup> The percentage of the antibodies of hepatitis B was 6%, hepatitis C was 22%, HIV was 2%. The authors of the report indicate the usage of the drugs as the determining factor in the high figures of the tested programme. The injected drug users would amount to 29% of all surveyed in the programme. Their rate of antibodies was the highest: the antibodies of hepatitis B was 18%, hepatitis C antibodies was 72%, HIV antibodies was 6%. 40% of all injecting drug users were recidivists, in the group of the first time offenders only 7% had any previous contact with drugs. For the first time prisoners (30% of the surveyed) the number of the antibodies was 2%, hepatitis C was 3%, the HIV antibodies were not detected in that group at all (Long at al.).