

# NORAH HOULT'S *POOR WOMEN!* A Critical Edition



Edited by Kathleen P. Costello-Sullivan





Norah Hoult's *Poor Women!*

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## A Critical Edition

Edited and with an Introduction by  
Kathleen P. Costello-Sullivan



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This edition is dedicated to  
Cynthia Roman and Beth Eisgrau-Heller;  
Audra De Paolo and Maryann Correll;  
Lisabeth Buchelt and Julie Grossman –  
all women who have made my life rich.

Norah Hoult's original dedication for *Poor Women!*  
To Bob



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## INTRODUCTION\*

Irish author Eleanor Norah Hoult (1898–1984) moved in prominent literary circles and corresponded actively with some of the leading Irish authors of her time, including James Stephens, Brigid Brophy, Sean O’Casey, and Sean O’Faolain. Oliver St John Gogarty sent poems and sketches to Hoult; he bemoaned that it was ‘a damned shame that the most realistic woman writer living only can get a £100 in advance subject to their damned Federal Tax’.<sup>1</sup> Sean O’Faolain wrote in 1936 to congratulate Hoult on her novel *Holy Ireland*, observing that he ‘admire[d] the strength of it [...] and the sympathy of it’.<sup>2</sup> Critics today are often equally positive: they compare her not only to short story writers O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor, but also to novelists Kate O’Brien and Edna O’Brien for the insight of her work into the lives of women and the influence of the Catholic Church.

Despite her reputation and a 44-year publishing career, Hoult’s oeuvre remains surprisingly neglected. She is generally recognized as a significant twentieth-century Irish author – yet reference to Hoult and to her work is often limited to indexes, biographical dictionaries and anthologies.<sup>3</sup> The need for a sustained critical and academic engagement with Hoult’s canon remains.

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\* Note: All citations from *Poor Women!* in the present text and notes are from this 1929 edition.

1 ‘Partial TLS signed Oliver Gayaffo’, Box 1, Folder 5, Norah Hoult Correspondence, MS2001-38, John J. Burns Library, Boston College. It seems evident from the address and correspondence that this is a letter from St John Gogarty, playfully signing with a nickname of unknown origin. Reprinted in appendix by permission of Colin Smythe Ltd on behalf of V.J. O’Mara.

2 ‘TLS from Sean O’Faolain to Norah Hoult, c. 1936’ Box 1, Folder 16, Norah Hoult Correspondence, MS2001-38, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

3 Hoult’s inclusion in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* vol. 4 on ‘Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions’ bespeaks her importance. However, of the 16 ‘studies’ Karen O’Brien lists in her entry on Hoult in *Irish Women Authors, an A-to-Z Guide*, 13 are either biographical dictionaries, entries to *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (3 in vol. 4) or indexes of authors (or specifically women authors). O’Brien, ‘Norah Hoult (1898–1984)’, *Irish Women Authors, an A-to-Z Guide*, edited by Alexander G. Gonzalez (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 151–54.

This edition seeks to rectify that critical oversight by introducing Hoult's short story collection *Poor Women!* to a new generation of readers. Called Hoult's 'best-known and most widely admired work',<sup>4</sup> *Poor Women!* was nonetheless rejected 19 times before its acceptance and publication in 1928 by Scholartis Press in London.<sup>5</sup> Yet its release was marked by almost immediate critical acclaim: the 1929 American edition featured an 'Open Letter' from H. M. Tomlinson, who noted that 'there is no doubt, if she continues to write, that she is likely to be freely named whenever the best fiction is discussed'. *Poor Women!* displays Hoult's subtlety and humour as an author and her nature as a keen witness to human frailty – perhaps the combination of 'strength' and 'sympathy' to which O'Faolain would refer. Hoult sketches her characters in all their flawed humanity, thus creating individuals 'whose thoughts and language inspire both the reader's sympathy and a sharp awareness of their limitations'.<sup>6</sup> This remains one of the most commented-upon aspects of her writing.

At the same time, Hoult unflinchingly signals the restrictions imposed on these characters by society and its institutions: she thus provides a window into the social, literary, and political milieu from which the collection hails. Largely welcomed for its engagement with women's and religious issues, *Poor Women!* also closely examines its settings of place and time. It thus displays a less-recognized but nonetheless keen awareness of wider historical issues such as the challenges of war and cultural identity construction. Additionally, her characters' emotional paralysis, and the care with which she captures their self-delusions, invite further comparison to better-known contemporary Irish literary giants such as James Joyce and Mary Lavin. *Poor Women!* exemplifies the talent, and also the relevance, of this much-neglected author.

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Norah Hoult was born in Dublin on 10 September 1898, to Anglo-Irish parents whose early deaths led to her being educated in various boarding schools in England. She worked as a journalist and book reviewer for publications including the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, *Pearson's Magazine*, and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, and occasionally reviewed for the *Irish Times*. Hoult returned to live in Ireland from 1931 to 1937; she then lived in the United States until 1939

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4 Marjorie Howes, 'Norah Hoult (1898–1984)', *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* vol. 4, 'Irish Women's Writing and Traditions' (Cork: Cork University Press and Field Day, 2002), 933.

5 O'Brien, 'Norah Hoult', 151.

6 Howes, 'Norah Hoult', 933.

before returning to London. Hoult spent her last years in Greystones, County Wicklow, until her death on 6 April 1984.<sup>7</sup>

Although Hoult was Dublin-born, her relationship to Ireland was complex. As Janet Madden-Simpson observes in her introduction to Hoult's later novel *Holy Ireland*, 'she [...] belonged much more emphatically to the Anglo, rather than to the Irish side of her cultural inheritance'.<sup>8</sup> Considering she spent much of her life in England after being orphaned, this would seem to be natural. Hoult herself notes that her relationship with her Irish heritage was complicated by family history, and by an Irish worldview she described as 'boil[ing] down to one word, bigotry':

I was very shocked to learn that my grandfather's house was locked against my [Irish] mother, who had eloped as far as the registrar's office on the quays, on the morning of her 21st birthday, to wed a faithful and non-Catholic suitor. [...] Then there were other instances of this bigotry. One was when my brother and myself went with my Irish grandmother on a charitable visit. We overheard the comment that it was sad to think that two such attractive children should go to hell as they were not being reared as Roman Catholics.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of these jarring experiences, Hoult's two novels focused on Ireland: *Holy Ireland* and its sequel, *Coming to the Fair*, both 'depict Irish family life from the end of the nineteenth century up to 1916 and particularly explore religious prejudice'.<sup>10</sup>

This interest in the consequences of restrictive religious practices – and particularly their cost for women – has been a central focus of what little critical attention Norah Hoult's work has enjoyed. Margaret MacCurtain observes that '[t]he Catholic hierarchy as authority, the Catholic school and

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7 Information for this biography was drawn from Corban Rhodes, 'Biographical Note', Norah Hoult Correspondence, MS2001-38, John J. Burns Library, Boston College. Also see O'Brien, 'Norah Hoult'.

8 'Introduction', *Holy Ireland* by Norah Hoult (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985), i–vi (ii). After reading this novel, however, Sean O'Faolain observed, 'I could almost believe you an <Irishwoman'. O'Faolain, 'Letter to Norah Hoult'.

9 Norah Hoult, 'Preface' to the Arlen House edition, *Holy Ireland* (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985).

10 Rhodes, 'Biographical Note'. Of a later novel, *Cocktail Bar*, Brigid Brophy writes to Hoult: 'To my half foreign mind, you tell the whole truth about the Irish – but simply, by just writing literature'. Brophy, 'ALS (on notecard) from Brigid Brophy to Norah Hoult, Jan 17, 1954'. Box 1, Folder 17, Norah Hoult Correspondence, MS2001-38, John J. Burns Library, Boston College. Letter used by permission of Sheiland Associates Ltd, acting on behalf of the estate of Brigid Brophy.

the boarding-school [...], the stifling religiosity of the home, these were the memories of novelists such as Kate O'Brien, Norah Hoult and Edna O'Brien'.<sup>11</sup> Karen O'Brien similarly suggests that Hoult merits comparison to these authors 'not only for being a great Irish writer, but also for being an author who deals with the oppressive facets of Catholic culture'.<sup>12</sup> Considering *Holy Ireland* against a text like Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*, the comparison seems evident.

However, Hoult's resistance to religious oppression is not limited in its scope. *Holy Ireland*, Madden-Simpson observes, considers

the condition of family life when it is dominated, rather than influenced, by dogma. *Holy Ireland* is not an anti-Catholic novel. [...] To Norah Hoult, the crime is not inherent in religion, but inherent in slavish devotion to it, whether it be Catholicism or Theosophy.<sup>13</sup>

*Poor Women!* illustrates the inclusive critique Hoult offers of misguided or 'slavish' religious practice, be it Catholic or otherwise. In the story 'Alice', for example, the main character, Miss Alice Jenkinson, a seemingly devout member of the 'Pexbourne-on-Sea Congregational Church', is notable for her self-congratulatory view of religion, as well as for her small-minded jealousies. Her 'smile of happy humility' at service contrasts ironically with her vanity and obsession with her appearance; her donation of a sixpence is matched by her observation that 'heaps of people in the choir only give a threepenny bit'.

In the same way, Alice's life with her sister is marked by rivalry and petty bitterness, and her inability to connect with others – owing to her own prudery, her sense of superiority and her obsession with appearances – leads Alice to be both vulnerable to the questionable advances of a bored vacationer and, perhaps even more piteously, wholly unequipped for what may have been her first (and only) chance at sexual intimacy. As a supposedly pious woman, Alice is not a spectacular failure: on the contrary, she is an all too common one.

Many of the religious characters in *Poor Women!* share this tendency to subordinate religious practice to their own desires. In 'The Other Woman', Monica, a mistress, attempts to strike a deal with God about the arrival of her adulterous lover, promising to 'be good' if God will only make George

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11 'Religion, Science, Theology and Ethics, 1500–2000'. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* vol. 4, 'Irish Women's Writing and Traditions' (Cork: Cork University Press and Field Day, 2002), 459–63 (462).

12 O'Brien, 'Norah Hoult', 152.

13 'Introduction', *Holy Ireland*, v.

arrive – but she feels driven to clarify her intention, lest ‘God [...] wriggle out of it by pretending not to understand’. This wilful misuse of religion is consistent with Hoult’s canonical critique of religious hypocrisy.

Similarly, in ‘Miss Jocelyn’, religion is used as a kind of rationalization by the eponymous protagonist, an older, single woman, as she tries first to deny her fate (losing her home and having to move in as a dependent of her cousin) – ‘God, Who answered all prayers, would help her if she only had faith, complete faith’ – and then, when she imagines a piece of luggage left on a train was intended for her, strives to use belief to create a desperate hope: ‘The initials [on the bag] were “A. J.”. The “J” seemed an extraordinary coincidence to Miss Jocelyn. [...] Supposing God, supposing Jesus had sent this bag to help her in her trouble!’. As entertaining as it is pathetic, Jocelyn’s delusion not only suggests the self-deceiving nature of her faith, but also gestures towards the paralyzing effect of religion on women whose lives are devoid of other societal options.

‘Bridget Kiernan’, the final story, is about a young Irish maid in an antagonistic relationship with her English employer, Mrs. Fitzroy, and particularly foregrounds the issue of religion. Bridget questions the sinfulness of her actions in having had premarital sex and frets over the consequences of a possible pregnancy: she worries over her mother’s possible response, gestures towards the history of Catholic priests’ control of women’s sexuality, and fears the potential to become an outcast. However, she also questions that same morality, contemplating women who have managed on their own:

There was Margaret Callaghan of Carrickmore, that the priest had sent away out of the parish because she wouldn’t tell him the name of the fellow that was after giving her a child. And she had just sailed off as cool as you please to Dublin, and, so they said, was seen walking down Grafton Street, dressed up to kill, with not a feather off her. Well, those girls might be bad, she wouldn’t say they weren’t, but didn’t they have a better time than sticking on toiling and moiling day after day with no thanks from anybody? [...] And hadn’t many another girl had her trouble, and got through it, and nobody a penny the wiser?

Bridget’s sense of the threat her pregnancy poses reflects a pointed critique of the religious and social consequences faced by women for pregnancies outside of marriage.

Like Jocelyn and Monica, however, Bridget also consistently negotiates with God, even while acting hypocritically. For example, she thanks God in the same breath as observing, ‘[I]t wouldn’t hurt me at all to know that [Mrs. Fitzroy had] fallen down where she stood and died’. Similarly, even as she prays, she simultaneously downplays her own supposed sense of culpability: ‘Sure, God

would forgive her if she truly repented and offended Him no more. And she did truly repent. Perhaps He'd let her off having a baby'.

Finally, like Alice, Bridget clearly sees religion as a matter of appearances, and her morality is up for negotiation. Thinking of a sermon, she notes that she 'remembered the time well, because she had been wondering if it would be right to pray for a bit of money so that she could get herself the new cute hat in Murphy's'. She ultimately denies responsibility for her actions altogether: 'She had been brought up badly, and that was the truth. It was her father's blame. For ever cursing and swearing at the priests and saying they were the bane of the country. God forgive him!'

Throughout *Poor Women!* Hoult thus makes a sustained and quite pointed critique, not only of individuals' hypocritical uses (and abuses) of religion, but also of the ways in which women are subject to, and conditioned by, religious ideologies that lock them into positions of subservience and social dependence. Hoult thus empathizes, yet holds her characters accountable for their behaviour; she simultaneously recognizes their weaknesses and the social and cultural circumstances at work against them, which they have often failed to interrogate.

In these sketches of women's responses to, and uses of, religion, we see another of the most prominent characteristics of Norah Hoult's work: her attention to detail and ability to capture the flawed humanity of her subjects. Consistently described as realistic in style and as 'focused on the small, quiet or unspoken intricacies of human relationships', Hoult's attention to detail is variously received.<sup>14</sup> For example, in a multi-novel review written for *The Irish Times* in 1952, one reviewer (identified only as 'B. W.') flatteringly compares another author to Norah Hoult, as both, he states, 'can, at times, turn [...] female characters inside out as easily as though they were so many gloves'.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, in his 'Biographical Note' prefacing the Boston College John J. Burns Library collection of Hoult correspondence, Corban Rhodes cites what he perceives to be Hoult's 'tend[ency] to overburden [stories in *Poor Women!*] with dull realistic details and thus to impede the action'.<sup>16</sup> This is notably true in 'The Other Woman', for example, in which Monica treads and re-treads the same anxieties and illusions for thirty-odd pages within the suffocating confines of her room, even though her abandonment is almost immediately clear to the reader.

14 Anonymous editor, 'Introduction', *The Persephone Book of Short Stories* (London: Persephone Books, 2012). She was also perceived, by at least one contemporary, as 'the most realistic woman writer living'. See note 1, above.

15 B. W. 'Recent Novels'. *The Irish Times* (1921–Current File): 6. 9 February 1952. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 March 2014.

16 'Biographical Note'.

The stories in *Poor Women!* are, however, less interested in action per se than in the movements of the mind. Monica's obsessive ruminations about her lost lover make for a somewhat claustrophobic read but, by detailing her mundane, fidgety movements about her home, Hoult recreates for the reader the suffocating despair, the abandonment, and the distorted and hopeless worldview from which Monica suffers. As a mistress – and a hopelessly devoted one – Monica lives in a Purgatory partly of her own making from which she is unable to imagine any escape, but the despair and sense of hopelessness she suffers are pitiful nonetheless: 'A Sunday morning like this: a wet chilly dreary London morning. [...] That was Life, as it waited for you, underneath Things'.

Many of the stories in Hoult's collection focus in this way on the mundane details of everyday life, and on the tales people tell themselves to create just this effect – a sense of the realness and, hence, the fallibility of these characters. In the story 'Ethel', the main character, who ran off with a lover, seeks to win back her disillusioned husband following the lover abandoning her and the death of her husband's good friend. Absolutely unapologetic for her betrayal, Ethel instead feels entitled to husband John's unflagging devotion and the financial gain it could bring: 'This was the beginning of her great chance. If she muffed it! But she wouldn't. John was always a fool. Easy money. People didn't really change'. Ethel's resentment when John resists her (which she reads as 'selfish'), her materialism, and her meditations on what she believes she is entitled to mark her as incredibly vain and narcissistic.

Nonetheless, Ethel's lack of self-awareness or ability to see beyond her own (heavily gendered) desires simultaneously renders her pathetic: 'She had been a fool about Billy perhaps. But not again. She knew what she wanted. Security. A house of her own. A servant to order about. Other married couples dropping in for a game of bridge'. Moreover, Ethel's focus solely on her (supposed) attractiveness and on what she can attain through feminine wiles carries with it the echo of accustomed financial dependence. Ethel is thus not only self-absorbed and selfish, but also a product of the financial dependency her society has taught her to expect. In this way, Hoult effects a critique of the societal patterns that condition women's behaviour even as, with Wollstonecraftian bluntness, she mocks and pities women who succumb to such conditions.

The second story in this collection, 'Violet Ryder', shares these themes of self-delusion, financial dependency, and societal expectations.<sup>17</sup> Violet,

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17 'Violet Ryder' was published separately as a novelette and was one of two stories not included in the 1928 publication of *Poor Women!* The present edition follows the 1929 American printing in part to include this story. The other story added in the 1929 edition was 'The Other Woman'.

an 18-year old woman working in an office and living with her mother, also suffers from a sense of entitlement. Scornful of the mother who supports her and looking forward to a 'future when there might be a husband to keep in hopeless adoration', Violet, like Ethel and Alice, agonizes about her appearance and views her attractiveness as the marker of her worth and the means to her future: 'Violet for the first time felt dismally that if she didn't look sharp, there was just a possibility that life might cheat her out of her dues'.

Similarly, her ignorant devotion to Miss Carey, an older co-worker, as a role model bespeaks her innocence and sheltered social life: although Miss Carey is described by the other office women as 'fast' and is 'reported to have a husband somewhere, and [to] be much older than she said', Violet sees her as sophisticated and mature. Violet's experience of having Miss Carey effectively prostitute them both for a drink and then of being assaulted herself by her 'date' in the taxi home betrays her entrapment between vulnerability and naiveté as a young unmarried woman, as well as her suffocation from the strictures of her single life at home.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of a woman reduced to a state of both mockable self-deception and sympathy by her social circumstance is the main character in the story 'Mrs. Johnson'. An aging prostitute, Mrs. Johnson is older and sick but maintains the illusion that she is better than the average streetwalker. She, like most of the characters in this collection, obsesses over her appearance: for example, she notes, 'The first thing was to look respectable, as of course in your way you were'. Similarly, as she begins her evening's work, Mrs. Johnson notes that she is 'too refined for this side of the Bridge'. She clings to this sense of superiority throughout: 'The action gave her the sense of being very much a lady, and for a few seconds the reflection that she was in reality superior to everybody else in the room comforted her'. Like Ethel, Alice, and Miss Jocelyn, Mrs. Johnson's distorted view of herself speaks to her self-deception; however, it also signals the severely limited currency women had to trade for advancement, acceptance, or recognition.

As the story progresses, the reader's critical recognition of Mrs. Johnson's delusions is tempered by an understanding of her sad financial and social straits. Recently recovered from the flu, she is nonetheless forced to go out to try to earn her rent for her impatient (but, thus far, forbearing) landlady. She uses drink and pubs as her only refuge, recognizing that she cannot compete with her younger colleagues, but too tired and dejected to leave the bar: 'She wouldn't be good enough for them. Too old! As a matter of fact she hadn't much of a chance sitting in this pub, at all. Too much light; too much

competition. Still, she'd wait a bit. It was a rest'. Rest and the escapism of alcohol are her only comforts.

Finally, we learn that Mrs. Johnson (tellingly referred to by her married name throughout) has been brought to these straits by widowhood, having owned a pub with her husband until his death left her destitute: 'Poor Jim! He was generous with his money when he had it. Too generous! Better for her today if he'd have been the saving kind. Ah, well! What was had to be!'. Mrs. Johnson, like Miss Jocelyn in particular, but like all the women in *Poor Women!* generally, may be self-deluded and flawed, but her marginal societal position and the lifetime of financial dependence to which she was consigned are clearly causal factors in her straitened circumstances.

In a short piece entitled 'Mary, Pity Women!' (sometimes included in 1929 editions of the story collection), Norah Hoult directly addresses the financial factors that bear on her characters' fates:

Most of us who are women, and particularly who are unsheltered women, have, I suppose, at one time or another, been moved to envy men the greater ease with which they can maintain their self-respect, and play their own hands without dissimulation; without niggardly fears for the future.

These stories are not propaganda; they are not attempts to solve the unsolvable [*sic*]. I wrote about the individual women, young and old, whom I have written about, because, very briefly, each of them happened to come my way; and it seemed to me that I was able to understand, at least in part, something about them.<sup>18</sup>

Hoult's recognition of the social plight of women has drawn comparisons to Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien, as we have seen – but her willingness to expose the ugly realities of middle-aged prostitution, old-age dependency on male relations, and the costs of single pregnancy are, in her era, particularly pointed and aggressive.

It is perhaps surprising, given Hoult's specific emphases on widowhood, old age, 'spinsterhood', and the financial and societal constraints imposed on women, that she is so seldom (if ever) compared to another of her approximate contemporaries, short story author and literary giant Mary Lavin. In

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18 Norah Hoult, 'Mary, Pity Women!' This short piece is included as a sort of pasted addendum or preface – sometimes numbered – to some 1929 editions of *Poor Women!* I have not been able to trace how it came to be included in only some printings, but I have included the passage in its entirety – along with a brief reading of its intertextual reference to Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same name – at the end of this edition.

large part, this may be because of Hoult's closer contemporaneity with Kate O'Brien and *Holy Ireland's* direct address of the Catholic Church. Lavin's work also often stresses women's tenacity in the face of social and personal challenges, whereas Hoult's characters, at least in *Poor Women!*, are generally less aware of the forces at work against them. Lavin's prose is also more descriptive than that found in Hoult's short story collection.

Nonetheless, Lavin's canon of short stories has many parallels to this collection – a parallel that bears further consideration. Hoult shares with Lavin the tendency to create incisive psychological portraits of her characters. Just as Lavin often employs the kind of restrained prose and spare analysis we have come to recognize in much later twentieth-century Irish writing, Hoult allows her characters' blindness to invite analysis through their ironic lack of awareness, as we have seen. Lavin draws on her own experiences in her representations, as is perhaps best evidenced in the collection *Happiness and Other Stories*; Hoult also drew heavily on her own history, particularly in relation to her Irish subject matter.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Lavin addresses issues of 'spinsterhood' in stories like 'A Single Lady', as does Hoult in stories like 'Miss Jocelyn'. Lavin's canonical, sympathetic engagement with widowhood is in some ways foreshadowed by Hoult's thoughtful treatment in 'Mrs. Johnson' some years before. As popular short story authors whose careers overlapped in early to mid- twentieth-century Ireland, and who share thematic parallels regarding Ireland, women's lives, financial and societal constraints, and the influence of the Catholic Church, Lavin and Hoult present exciting opportunities for further comparative study.

Unlike in much of Lavin's work, of course, in *Poor Women!* Norah Hoult does not focus on small-town or rural life in Ireland. On the contrary, her works consistently display a careful sense of urban setting and of London as geographical space. This tendency to be precise and locational in her stories associates her more closely with another literary contemporary to whom she is seldom compared: James Joyce.

It is probable that Hoult read and digested *Ulysses*, published in 1922 before she wrote *Poor Women!* in 1928. As John Harrington observes, when reviewing Samuel Beckett's *More Pricks than Kicks* after its publication in 1934, Hoult recognized Belacqua's similarities to Leopold Bloom and Beckett's indebtedness to Joyce's earlier novel.<sup>20</sup> It is entirely possible that Hoult's approach to representing setting – particularly city space – was influenced by Joyce.

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19 O'Faolain wrote of *Holy Ireland*: 'It's good, Norah. With a great deal of yourself in it'. 'Letter to Norah Hoult'.

20 Harrington, cited in O'Brien, 'Norah Hoult', 151.