Horácio Jorge Ferreira da Silva

YARNS OF COMMUNITY

INTERTEXTUALITY AND COMMUNITY IN ÉILÍS NÍ DHUIBHNE'S *THE SHELTER OF NEIGHBOURS*

Dissertação de Mestrado em Estudos de Cultura, Literatura e Línguas Modernas, orientada pela Professora Doutora Adriana Bebiano, apresentada ao Departamento de Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra.

Outubro de 2023

FACULDADE DE LETRAS

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Ficha Técnica

Tipo de trabalho	**Dissertação**
Título	Yarns of Community
Subtítulo	Intertextuality and Community in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Shelter of Neighbours*.
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Júri	**Presidente:** Doutora Maria José Florentino Mendes Canelo **Vogais:** 1. Doutora Adriana Conceição Silva Pereira Bebiano Nascimento 2. Doutora Maria Teresa Correia Casal
Identificação do Curso	**2º Ciclo em Estudos de Cultura, Literatura e Línguas Modernas**
Área científica	Literaturas e Culturas
Especialidade/Ramo	Estudos Ingleses e Americanos
Data de defesa	19-10-2023
Classificação	19 valores
Ano	2023

1 2 9 0 FACULDADE DE LETRAS UNIVERSIDADE D COIMBRA

Agradecimentos / Acknowledgements

Dedico este trabalho aos meus pais por, primeiro que todos, me terem feito entender o valor do saber, da leitura e dos valores que deles colhemos.

À minha mulher e aos meus filhos, pela paciência aparentemente sem limites durante estes dois anos, o meu enorme obrigado e as minhas sinceras desculpas pelo ocasional mau-feitio e pelas ausências que a leitura constante sempre implicou.

À Professora Doutora Adriana Bebiano pelo estímulo, paciência, olhar meticuloso, pelo enorme saber acrescentado e partilhado (este trabalho, afinal de contas, é nosso, sendo os defeitos todos meus), e por me ter ajudado a começar a perceber a escrita de mulheres. Acima de tudo, pelo gosto de com ela conversar sobre livros. Um abraço de gratidão!

Inevitavelmente, a Éilís Ní Dhuibhne pelas horas prazerosas de leitura, *gabhaim buíochas leat ó bhun mo chroí*.

I dedicate this work to my parents for, before anyone else, having helped me see the worth of knowledge, of reading and of all the values we take from them.

To my wife and children, for their endless patience throughout these two years, my huge thank you and sincere apology for my occasional short fuse and for the not being there when the constant work demanded my full attention.

To Professor Adriana Bebiano for the motivation and the patience; for her meticulous draft readings; for the enormous amount of knowledge added and shared (this dissertation is a joint effort, save for the mistakes, which are all mine) — and for helping me begin understanding women's writing. Above all, for the pleasure of discussing books with her. An indebted hug!

Inevitably, to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne for the hours of pleasurable reading, *gabhaim buíochas leat ó bhun mo chroí*.

RESUMO

Contos de comunidade: intertextualidade e comunidade em *The Shelter of Neighbours* de Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

Escrevendo na Irlanda entre meados de 1970 até ao presente, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne participou na lenta, mas inexorável, passagem de uma sociedade profundamente tradicionalista, patriarcal, misógina e católica para uma vibrante comunidade globalizada que procurou ser, simultaneamente, irlandesa e cosmopolita. Na coletânea de contos que me proponho discutir, *The Shelter of Neighbours*, de 2012, é possível detetar o esforço de olhar criticamente para aquela história sem ignorar as suas zonas mais sombrias. A escrita dos contos implica também uma reflexão sobre o ato de escrita, uma vez que essa escrita revela uma escolha de perspetiva que por sua vez elide outros pontos de vista. Ao ler Ní Dhuibhne, lê-se com o olhar de uma folclorista feminista, o que significa um olhar progressista difractado pela tradição.

Esta escolha condiciona a nossa perceção de comunidade proposta pela autora. Na verdade, a justaposição intertextual de uma narrativa realista com contos tradicionais, bem como outras formas de intertextualidade presentes nos contos, produz aquilo a que chamo de contos de comunidade, isto é, representações da comunidade alternativas às narrativas dominantes sobre a sociedade irlandesa das últimas décadas.

O meu objetivo será tentar entender como Éilís Ní Dhuibhne conscientemente entretece a sua comunidade, por um lado, a partir de uma perspetiva feminista e, por outro, na sua forma muito específica de "Irishness", o que evidencia um jogo intertextual e metaficcional muito produtivo entre contos tradicionais da tradição oral, bem como textos canónicos da literatura ocidental, e os seus contos situados no período chamado "Celtic Tiger" e os anos de quebra económica pós-2008. Nesse sentido, farei referência ao contexto da escrita; farei também uma breve abordagem global da sua obra; colocarei a autora no contexto da escrita feminista; desenvolverei a noção de intertextualidade do ponto de vista dos contos do folclore e outras tradições; e, finalmente, focar-me-ei criticamente em quatro dos contos da coletânea.

Palavras-chave: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne; intertextualidade; contos tradicionais; perspetivas feministas; comunidade; metaficção.

ABSTRACT

Yarns of Community: Intertextuality and Community in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Shelter of Neighbours*.

Writing in Ireland between the mid-1970s to the present, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne partook of the slow but inexorable movement from a very traditionalist, patriarchal, misogynist, and catholic society to a contemporary global vibrant community at pains to be simultaneously Irish and cosmopolitan. In the short story collection that I will be discussing, *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012), one sees the effort of critically looking at that history without ever allowing for turning a blind eye to its shadows. The writing of stories also implies a reflection on the act of writing itself, since when one writes a story one chooses a specific perspective which in turn precludes other points of view. When reading Ní Dhuibhne one reads through the eyes of a feminist folklorist, which means a progressive look diffracted by tradition.

This choice conditions our view of the community proposed by the author. In fact, the intertextual juxtaposition of a realist narrative with folk tales and other forms of intertextuality produces what I call a yarning of community — alternative representations of community.

My objective will be to try to understand how Éilís Ní Dhuibhne very consciously yarns her community, on the one hand, from a feminist perspective and, on the other, from her specific type of Irishness, which foregrounds a productive intertextual and metafictional play between folk tales from the oral tradition and texts of western literature and her contemporary stories of the Celtic Tiger and post-boom years. For that I will refer to the context of writing; make an overview of the *oeuvre*; place the author in a feminist writing context; elaborate on her folkloristic and otherwise intertextual writing; and finally focus critically on four stories of the collection.

Keywords: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne; intertextuality; folk tales; feminist perspectives; community; metafiction.

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Introduction

The journey: searching for belongingness

When starting something like this dissertation, one ought to be honest and begin from its inception: in the beginning there was little more than a dark void, which is much the same as saying ignorance. And the beginning dates from two years ago when I enrolled in the master's course. I did not quite know what I was getting myself into. I expected not to have to read again "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote" or go through *Much Ado About Nothing* or, for that matter, *Hard Times*. In the end, I had to come to grips with "The Wife of Bath" and did have to go through *Hard Times*. It was worth it, certainly.

At the beginning of the English Literature Seminar on Irish Women Writers, my knowledge of Irish Literature did not go further than the canonic Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett; Colm Tóibín was the most recent author I had read, and I arrived to him via his Henry James's magnificent biographical novel *The Master* (2004). They were all men. Faced with the seminar's reading list, I realised I did not know even one of the names (and one of them I could not even pronounce). They were all women. Not only that, but we were going to approach them from a feminist point of view, which was going to be yet another challenge, as my only dealings with feminism so far had been through Ibsen's Nora[1] and Mary McCarthy's *The Group*[2].

I had to do something and quick. I decided to go through the list fast and what I discovered was disconcerting: the Emerald Isle had much more to it than met the eye. The Catholic Church apparently had a power which was enormous; it was involved, through its convents and its close associations with the Irish State, in the fierce control of all Irish citizens, particularly women and children; men drank heavily (which was a stereotype confirmed by some of the fiction[3], but also by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne herself [4] in an essay called "The Irish" (1999) published in *Europeans: Essays on Culture and Identity*); but, despite the "normal" violence towards women and children associated with drunkenness, they held an impunity and a level of

[1] Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Norwegian playwright, published *A Doll's House* in 1879. The play, although reluctantly by the author, was considered a feminist play.

[2] Mary MacCarthy (1912-1989) wrote *The Group* in 1963 to enormous success. Its issues echoed very much in the seminar sessions of English Literature on Irish Women Writers.

[3] E.g., in *The Country Girls* (1960), Kate's father is drunkenly abusive.

[4] Cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 1999b: 66.

control over especially their wives and daughters' lives[5] (children locked and mistreated in convents; girls and women locked at home by male family members, or sent abroad to hide unwanted pregnancies, written off public life). It seemed that women's sexuality[6] was an untouchable subject in Ireland and that the women writers we were going to discuss would mostly, directly, or obliquely, be touching it brazenly.

Sexuality was not going to be the only issue: we would also be discussing marriage, motherhood, nuns and convents, travellers, The Troubles, Big House fiction, lesbianism and, curiously, fairies[7]. The discussion would entail many more issues, but especially important would be learning to read in such a way as to be able to recognise and debunk dominant, hegemonic discourses embedded in the behaviours represented in the short stories. That knowledge would help us (presumably specialised readers) reconfigure our many expectations (and prejudices) about those issues.

At the end of the reading list loomed the unpronounceable Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and her story "Midwife to the Fairies", first included in the collection *Blood and Water* (1988), which I was going to have to tackle and present for discussion. When I first read the story, I did not get it. I could detect some of the issues (unwanted pregnancy, the secret and shame it involved in the 1980s, mistreatment of young women and the murdering of children); however, what baffled me was what I later learned to call the juxtaposition of genres — how was it supposed to be read? And was the tale in italics (a legend[8]) going on in the protagonist's mind? It did not seem so. It looked as though the contemporary story was a sort of rewriting of the older one[9] or a sort of distorting mirror.

[5] In Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* trilogy (1960-1964), as well as in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), violence towards women and children is represented as indeed gruesome.

[6] When I write "sexuality" I am quite aware that it is not synonymous to sex, but a rather more complex concept. I have in mind the World Health Organisation's definition, according to which "sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and it encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships." (cf. https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_2, accessed on 29.10.2023)

[7] No pun intended.

[8] "Legends, as a rule, deal with supernatural beings, fairies, ghosts, the leprechaun, who are—or were—believed to exist by those who told or listened to these stories." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 208)

[9] Donald Barthelme's *Snow* White (1967) as well as Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice* (1997) popped to mind as the only fairy tale rewritings I had ever read.

Earlier experiences with postmodernist fiction went through my head, as I could not help feeling I was lost in some sort of textual funhouse[10] in which the author problematised the act of writing itself. Could it be that "The Midwife" was a metafictional short story? There had to be more than met the eye, some subtext that clarified the intertextuality and brought a further, deeper meaning to the story.

Thus began my relationship with the author, and what indeed attracted me to her writing. The more I read of and about her, however, the harder it seemed to get. There are her names: the Irish and its English version (which is the original?); the married name which she uses academically; the different pseudonyms — all of them as she takes on different identities writing across genres and in either Irish or English (novels, children's books, plays, short stories, crime fiction). Then there is the command of two or more languages. English is prevalent, but Irish occasionally surfaces. For a writer who only writes about Ireland and the Irish I find peculiar also the wish to escape (an exile which is not only felt as geographical), yet, simultaneously, the compulsion to look at the country, to revisit it, its present and its past as represented in many of her books. Lastly there was the intertextual use of folk tales (and of urban legends, proverbs, or myths), as well as the interplay with canonical texts. All these vectors, present throughout Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's fiction, but specifically in *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012)[11], speak of a remaking of a space that is both place and self, that is to say, community and the longing to belong. Her stories do, in the end, really build community.

In an interview, recorded in 2020, the author, quoting a conversation with Richard Pine, a Lawrence Durrell specialist, states, and agrees with it, that "all writing is about the writer and if a writer tells you otherwise, they're lying" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2020a: n.p.). This is not to say that all her writing (fiction is probably *le mot just* here) is autobiographical. Nor is it especially relevant to hunt for clues that could eventually point to autobiography. The biography often seeps into the fiction and allows the readers to think at least about the writer and how she (apparently) (mis)leads them in a decoding of her work. I think that a life could, indeed, become "one [of the keys] to read a fiction"[12] (Bebiano, 2002: 134). In fact, apart from most her characters and narratorial voices being women, some of them are also writers; others are

[10] *Lost in the Funhouse* (1966) is a postmodern and metafictional collection of short stories by John Barth (1930-), who, among others, also wrote the novel *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), in which two storytellers tell each other stories to try to overcome writer's block.

[11] Henceforth referred to as *The Shelter*.

[12] All the translations from languages other than English are mine.

married to older men who are foreigners from Scandinavian countries, like the author was; still others are emigrants in a Northern country; others yet work in libraries, again, like she did — and several differing characteristics that cross the border between the writer's life and her fictional representations. When reading Ní Dhuibhne one is aware of how crucial issues of identity are, especially in stories of the 1990s (cf. Ingman, 2009: 264), or, to put it another way, how central the questioning and affirmation of the self is. Although it is impossible (and possibly irrelevant) to say how autobiographical a story is (e.g., an Irish librarian living abroad and married to a Scandinavian writer of crime fiction), in "It is a Miracle", from *The Shelter* we can see a character showing all the signs of an unstable self while seeking to affirm herself even in all her instability: exile; unsatisfying albeit pleasant marriage; mismatched interests to her colleagues' at work; remote ancestors; assumption of a sexual desire which she has naturalised as inappropriate but wishes strongly to express.

In Chapter 1, Section 1, I will be going through the context in which Éilís Ní Dhuibhne grew up and became a writer, from the second half of the 1950s through to the 1970s, a time when a strong nationalist, traditionalist, patriarchal, misogynist State leaned heavily on a powerful Catholic Church — a time that came to be known as "de Valera's Ireland"[13]. In Section 2 of the same chapter, I will be looking at some moments of her life which also seem relevant to understand her writing. In the next two Sections, I will be looking, firstly, at the author's *oeuvre*, from the publication of her first stories by the hand of David Marcus[14] to her latest published collection of original short stories. Secondly, I will be selecting from that overview what I find to be the major issues she tackles and discuss their relevance in a more focused reading of *The Shelter*.

There are moments in some of the stories of this collection (and of her fiction in general) open to metafiction, a self-reflective writing, particularly (but not only) when Ní Dhuibhne moves between folk tales and contemporary realist stories, and transcends both genres as in, for example, "The Man Who Had No Story". By reflecting on "the act of writing itself" and "moving […] the boundaries between genres" (Bebiano, 2002: 202)[15], the author is creating a

[13] Éamon de Valera (1882-1973) was an Irish revolutionary involved in the foundation of the Irish Free State (1922), who became Taoiseach (Prime Minister) (1937-1948) and later President (1959-1973) of Ireland, a man of immense power and influence in the country.

[14] David Marcus (1924-2009): poet, novelist, short story writer and journalist, literary editor for the *The Irish Press* from 1968, and responsible for mentoring "a generation of emerging Irish writers" (Maume, 2016: n.p.), among whom was Ní Dhuibhne.

[15] Despite focusing on the hybridity of historic novels, I find Bebiano's arguments relative to metafiction and genre particularly relevant. Firstly, the relationship between folktales and realist fiction is similarly unexpected to readers

hybrid and "casting new shadows" (*ibidem*) on both the folk tales and the realist depictions. Furthermore, the idea of metafiction, or of a self-reflective text, foregrounds the act of writing and, consequently, the writer and what she is trying to do.[16]

The frequent use of folk tales intertextually questions the linear mode of time representation, typical of realist fiction, by bringing new insights about conventional representations of the past, instability to the comfort of reading and by casting an orality tone on the written short stories, making of the resulting text a hybrid. This is partly suggested by Anne Fogarty (although in reference to another collection of short stories), when she points out that some "narrative devices deployed by Ní Dhuibhne […] create unsettling effects" which can be said to foreground "points of contact between past and present and the oral and the written" (Fogarty, 2009: 72). In fact, this type of intertextuality brings to contemporary written texts the ability, attributed to the oral tradition by Angela Bourke[17] in "Oral Traditions" in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume IV: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*, of being able to "frame a moment in time as separate from the continuous present" and encourage "ways of thinking and knowing which can be independent of the linear modes of writing and print." (Bourke, 2002: 1191) Even though these characterisations were made concerning the oral traditions of storytelling, they are relevant, I think, when reflecting on the intertextual use of folklore in realist short stories, as they deconstruct the notion of linear time and, at the same time, of solitary reading, as suggested by Bertrand Cardin: "we, readers, can recognize ourselves in the neighbours gathered around the peat fire". (Cardin, 2014: 5) The linearity, which we can perhaps call a monological sequencing of events, is interrupted, or questioned by the intertextual introduction of the oral tradition (cf. Cahill, 2018: 431)[18] in written texts. This,

as the one she extensively analyses between literature and history. Secondly, from both contacts, however differently, there arises a new and more complex (and rich) understanding of the strength of narrative in the shaping of human knowledge. Finally, there is in both encounters a foregrounding of silenced subjectivities, in the former women's and children's and their sufferings, in the latter, among others, of those lives subsumed by the major events, typically highlighted in historiography. (Cf. Bebiano, 2002: 202-217)

[16] Although metafiction and autobiography are two distinct narrative modes of writing, in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne the autobiographical elements also contaminate the actual creation of the texts and lend them an extra shadow, or layer of meaning. One clear example of that contamination would be the story "Illumination", in which an Irish woman writer, living with other artists, reflects about the act of writing, alluding in the process to many writers whom the reader knows, from the interviews quoted throughout this dissertation, are Ní Dhuibhne's favourites.

[17] Co-editor of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume IV: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions* and responsible for its Section on the "Oral Traditions", Angela Bourke is mainly a scholar who published, among other things, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* as well as *Maeve Brennan: Homesick at The New Yorker*, both examples of feminist rewriting of silenced women's voices (and colonised existences).

[18] Susan Cahill is referring to *The Bray House* (1991), but the idea of intertextuality "opening up alternate temporal spaces to challenge traditional historiographical thought" seems to be relevant here as well.

"the inscription in the text of an extra-textual referent of a narrative genre that obeys diverse conventions causes ambiguities in the reading" (Bebiano, 2002: 203)[19] and provokes critical reflection in a disruptive way. The disruption brought about by the intertextual use of folk tales removes the reader from "the illusion of reality" (D'hoker, 2016: 178) created by the verisimilitude of plot and characters, and metafictionally enacts a dialogical crosscutting (what Fogarty calls "unsettling effects" — vd. *supra*). The Ní Dhuibhnean short story often brings about a rewriting of the past and of the present in such a way that both come out changed (hybridised). As Elke D'hoker further says, this writing strategy "draw[s] attention to the constructedness and artificiality of the story told." (*ibidem*)

In Chapter 2 I will thus be discussing the intertextual use of folk tales and how this strategy foregrounds Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Irishness. I will also be discussing the intertextual use of western literature. The result of both forms of intertextuality is a questioning of the realist mode that can only be called metafictional. If the centrality of the short story, as the most popular genre in Irish Literature, can be said to represent the continued inheritance of the oral tradition (Cardin, 2014: 5-6), then the evident use of asides and narratorial comments calls attention to the fact that the story is being *written*. The postmodern[20] "foregrounding of the act of narration and the process of telling" (D'hoker, 2016: 180) also present in the short stories from *The Shelter*, besides calling the reader's attention to the actual existence of someone telling/writing a story[21], reminds one that in that action and in those processes there are conventions (shared memories, shared readings, superimposed narratives) that affect one's perceptions of reality, thus reminding the reader of the constructedness of the story. There is here a question of genre, specifically of realist storytelling, as we have seen. When using folk tales or when imitating storytellers or discussing directly the act of writing as conditioned by other perspectives (as for instance the reader's), Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is diffracting a monological perception of truth and pointing to an inability of the realist story to reflect nature as it is because the mirror being held up to nature is explicitly constructed. In the words of the protagonist of the story "Illumination", "one is left to write only what has been written — in a slightly different way — a million times already". (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 39)

[19] Adriana Bebiano is discussing the hybridity in postmodern historical fiction which claims discursive validity on a par with historiography, an issue also pertinent for the reading of Ní Dhuibhne's intertextuality.

[20] I am aware of the problems that emerge from the use of this category. Vd. *infra* footnote No. 92 (p. 66).

[21] D'hoker points to the narrators in Ní Dhuibhne being "given to intrusive comments about the stories and the characters, while also being privy to their innermost feelings and thoughts." (D'hoker, *ibidem*)

Finally, in Chapter 3, I will be addressing four short stories from *The Shelter*. The stories I chose ("The Man Who Had No Story", "It Is a Miracle", "The Blind" and "The Shelter of Neighbours") are, I feel, the most representative of the collection and of the issues that distinguish this from other women Irish writers' work. The four stories represent Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's concerns with problematising tradition and contemporary Ireland and with that effort of representing community, rewriting it in such a way that past and present blend productively, in the sense that they bring with them hybrid new meanings to the community. In all of them elements from the oral tradition (Irish legends, motifs from international folk tales and proverbs) interconnect with yarns of contemporary Ireland, from the 1960s to the first decade of 2000. The result is an intertextual yarning of community. When I say her stories are yarns, I choose an unusual word for these unusual stories in which diverse threads are intertwined to produce an entertaining tale. I have in mind that carding wool to produce yarn was one of the contexts in which traditional stories were told in the long winter months, and not only in Ireland. Furthermore, telling tales helped build a sense of community in people, not only from what the stories had of a shared tradition but also from how they reinforced anew the existing bonds. How to answer the initial doubt: are neighbours shelters? Elke D'hoker proposes an optimistic solution to the final predicament of suburban solitude proposed by the protagonist of "Red-Hot Poker": "the plot of the individual stories and their structural integration in the collection suggest that, whether you are sheltered or shadowed by another's presence […] human interactions determine one's life, to the good and to the bad". (D'hoker, 2016: 137) That is to say, "*Is fearr an troid ná an t-uaigneas* […] The fighting is better than the loneliness". (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 12)

The journey starts, I would say, by looking for beginnings; first, at how Ní Dhuibhne's life slowly moulded her as a reader who became a woman; then at how the woman became a folklorist feminist writer; finally at how she looks at her neighbours (writers, men, women, children) and in a way, perhaps indirectly, tells her story through their stories and thus figures and reconfigures her place and herself in contemporary Ireland and the world, as she documents "the way people feel at *this* juncture in history and in *this* place" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* O'Connor, 2009: 278 [my emphasis]), a juncture in history and a place to which she also belongs.

Chapter 1 — Setting Off

1.1 - Ní Dhuibhne in the context of Irish women writers

The knowledge of history is relevant when reading Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's stories. This is particularly true about the history of how women were represented in the Irish context after 1922. As a nationalist reaction to years of British rule, the following five decades are characterised by the rigidity of state-sponsored religion (and how it restricted women) and by poverty and emigration. Due to some economic development of the 1960s, free education came to be. This event is considered by the author herself, born in 1954, as pivotal to her life: "[…] my entire education, up to and including my Ph.D (as far as I recall), was free, something for which I am eternally grateful to the Irish state" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 138-9). It would mean, for the author, self-discovery, which usually goes together with self-creation, a period – the 1970s – which culminated in her self-defining not only as a woman, but also as a writer and a folklorist (*ibidem*: 139). It was the time when most young Irish women realised that they could be as good as or even better than "the other tribe", the fortunate happy-go-lucky boys. And access to education was crucial in this process.

The introduction of free schooling in Ireland, in 1966, was, also in the words of Martina Devlin, a "silver bullet" and "transformative", especially for women, (Devlin, 2021: 11). Furthermore, the accession to the EEC (1973), with the consequent further economic development, offered more possibilities for women to find footholds in all the fields of self-expression and public roles until then (almost) exclusively the privilege of the male. These included financial independence – access to qualified jobs –, a forum — opportunities for publication, e.g. Attic Press, Arlen House and other women Publishing Houses — and the sexual and personal freedom brought about later in the decade by the availability of contraception[22], which "was arguably the single greatest improvement in the condition of life for women; it paved the way for multiple other changes improving women's wellbeing and enabling them to have some chance of fulfilling themselves professionally, artistically and financially." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 18)[23]

[22] Contraceptives could be legally sold in pharmacies, from 1979 onwards, but only to married women, when prescribed by a doctor. They were of course available earlier, but illegally.

[23] The issue and its implications for a woman are broached in the story "The Day Elvis Presley Died" (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2000: 57-8) included in the collection *The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Stories* (2000).

In her introduction to *Look! It's a Woman Writer. Irish Feminisms. 1970-2020*, a collection of testimonies by Irish women writers which she organized herself, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne refers to several women writing before the 1970s and 1980s, the decades when feminist writing gained momentum in Ireland[24]. This happened alongside with the availability of contraception, on the one hand (which gives women the freedom men always had of expressing their sexuality without the danger of pregnancy), and the emergence of feminist Publishing Houses, on the other, as well as openness to the foreign influence of feminist theory (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 20). According to Anne Fogarty, "Self-consciously feminist fiction, marketed to meet a new appetite for such work […] emerged from the early 1980s" (Fogarty, 2018: 260), although in Heather Ingman's words, "the 1980s was, at least on the surface, a decade of regression [for feminism]" (Ingman, 2013: 189). Be that as it may, it was from 1973 onwards, by the end of Éamon de Valera's presidency, and the foundation, in 1975, of "Ireland's first feminist press" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 20), that women's voices started being heard again.[25]

The status of women in Ireland (from 1922 onwards) was determined by patriarchal representations: women were viewed as central to Ireland's self-image. That centrality, however, meant that women's identities were pre-determined and subsumed by the identity of the nation, of which Catholicism was a fundamental pillar. In fact, "the Catholic culture […] with its representations of martyrdom and the centrality that the concept of "sacrifice" has in it" (Bebiano, 2013: 109) extended its arm over women and forced them, in view of the sacrifice in blood made by the male freedom fighters (cf. *infra*, p. 10), to comply with their view of the Nation. "Irish nationalism, particularly as embodied in Éamon de Valera's 1937 Constitution, positioned Irish women as bearers of children and keepers of the home, excluded from political and public life." (Ingman, 2016: 5-6) This casting of women as symbols of the nation is not new to Irish nationalism: "On a symbolic level, going back to the eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry, Ireland was constructed as a woman victimised by the colonising English male. She was Hibernia, Mother Ireland, the Poor Old Woman, the Shan Van Vocht, Cathleen Ní Houlihan,

[24] In 1928 Norah Hoult (1898-1984) published *Poor Women!* in which the subjugated status of women was represented; Kate O'Brien (1897-1974) had her books banned in Ireland, e.g., *Mary Lavelle* (1936) also because of how women's agency and sexuality were represented; and Edna O'Brien (1930-), who also had her trilogy *The Country Girls* (1960-64) banned in Ireland. These are some of the literary forerunners of feminist writing in Ireland.

[25] In the beginning of the 20th century, at the time of the Irish Women's Franchise League, Irish women had a public voice. A significant number of Irish women also took part in the War of Independence. However, the Free State, the Great War and then the threat of fascism from abroad, in Heather Ingman's words, "sought to thrust women back into the home." (Ingman, 2016: 10)

Dark Rosaleen. The Devotional Revolution of the mid-nineteenth century added the cult of the Virgin Mary […].” (Ingman, 2016: 7)

Any attempt at a self-expression that clashed with nationalist and masculinist mythologising was met with censorship of the kind that Norah Hoult, Kate O’Brien and Edna O’Brien suffered. According to Ailbhe Smyth, “[t]he prohibition against women’s quest for creative expression is absolute, the sanction against those who disobey is swift and total annihilation. Women’s experiences, visions, voices are fated to be submerged by the relentless flow of patriarchal myth and history, of politics and economics” (Smyth, 1989: 7). Furthermore, any woman whose sexual behaviour that was publicly understood to be unchaste or impure was “not only shocking, but she was also seen as anti-Irish or ‘foreign’. Very often she had to be expelled, if not from her country, at least from her family or her community.” (Ingman, 2016: 7)

Ana Sebastião, in her Masters Thesis, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, discusses the work of Mary Dorcey, the first woman to openly broach the subject of homosexuality in Ireland in her writing, whose verisimilar “portrayal of queer relationships (particularly lesbian relationships) go[es] against the grain of Ireland’s heteronormative, misogynistic, and patriarchal culture.” (Sebastião, 2022: 9) She compares two periods in Irish history, one represented by Mary Dorcey’s grandmother (the time of the fight for independence), and another by Dorcey’s mother (New State and de Valera’s time), and comments on how there was a regression in how homosexuality was seen. In the first period, “characterized by a political and moral openness” (*ibidem*: 19) people knew of the existence of homosexual couples, whereas in the more recent period (the 1950s), “characterized by a deep moral conservatism which entailed the repression of all forms of sexuality” (*ibidem*), people like her mother could not imagine that such relationships existed. Furthermore, due to an even more repressive attitude towards women’s sexuality, “homosexuality was confined to men while lesbians were invisible also as women. Indeed, lesbian invisibility is part of the wider picture of the invisibility of the sexuality of all women”. (*ibidem*: 21)

This invisibility extends even further to the rewriting of the history of the heroic fight for freedom from the British colonisers, as women were deleted from that history. As an example of that historiographic excision, Adriana Bebiano quotes Cal McCarthy who informs us that “70 women fought in the ranks of the 1916 Easter Rising rebellious.” (McCarthy *apud*

Bebiano, 2013: 122) Honouring them as equal-status heroes would not be in line with their symbolic role mentioned above (cf. *supra*, p. 9).

As one of the spearheads of feminist activism, especially through her efforts in providing education possibilities for women which would enable their agency, Ailbhe Smyth, quoted by Heather Ingman, wrote: "the tide was on the turn and Irish women were once again signaling their desire for change and their determination to bring it about" (*ibidem*: 22). And in fact many things had to change. Divorce was impossible, even if a woman was subjected to violence at home; financial independence was also curtailed, either because after getting married women could not hold most jobs or because, if not married, they were paid less than half what a man got; women could not have a bank account or get a loan from a bank without the husband's consent; contraception, as aforementioned, was forbidden, which usually would imply either unwanted pregnancy or violence, when consent was lacking; pregnancy out of wedlock meant almost always shame, banishment, poverty, in some cases abortion or maltreatment in the hands of nuns in Magdalene asylums[26]; and higher education was mostly inaccessible to women or especially hard to attain. With such constraints on their sexuality and on their lives in general, that intended to keep women in the domestic sphere only (cf. Ingman, 2016: 14-21), a strong feminist counterculture had to take shape in order to help women fight the oppression they were subjected to and against which they had huge difficulties in rebelling against.

Feminist writing in Ireland (as in the rest of the Anglophone world and Europe (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 20) meant a reaction to the hegemonic discourse in which gender was a secondary issue. Colin Graham states that "[g]ender becomes subaltern to dominant nationalism" (Graham *apud* Bebiano, 2011a: 257). Bebiano further states that "the hegemonic political discourse […] in which the national identity narrative is highlighted, and other issues are obscured or forgotten, is also reflected in the narrative fiction produced by Irish writers." (Bebiano, *ibidem*). Women, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne among them, and men,[27] started writing about

[26] Magdalene Laundries were prison-like, church-run laundries, where "girls and women were kept, forced to carry out unpaid labour and subjected to severe psychological and physical maltreatment […]. The women and girls who suffered [there] included those who were perceived to be 'promiscuous', unmarried mothers, the daughters of unmarried mothers, those who were considered a burden on their families or the State, those who had been sexually abused, or had grown up in the care of the Church and State." (In http://jfmresearch.com/home/preserving-magdalene-history/about-the-magdalene-laundries/, accessed on 2.12.2022) This issue is movingly depicted in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021); cf. esp. p. 38 and *passim*.

[27] "1990. The year of the woman. They were all over the place. […] And the famous men writers were on the women's bandwagon." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 146)

women and their perspectives, and they worked hard to overcome "the hard fact […] that [their] voices ha[d] been overwhelmed as much by the needs of the nation as by the dictates of patriarchy" (Smyth, 1989: 8).

A writing community emerged from the strength of this impetus, and women started sharing their knowledge and abilities with each other in the creative writing courses then recently made available at universities, widely promoted by publishers, such as the aforementioned Attic Press and Arlen House, but also sponsored by the state (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 22-3): "The formation of women-only workshops in Ireland — spearheaded by Eavan Boland[28] — was undoubtedly a factor in supporting and encouraging women to write and to keep on writing" (*ibidem*: 22).

The economic boom of the 1990s would apparently pave the way for more books being published and more readers having the means to buy them. Nevertheless, when the general feeling is one of optimism about the future, and old problems are being finally solved by a ruling body headed by a woman[29], no one was much interested in writers who did not turn a blind eye[30] to how women had been and, in some cases, were still being treated. Further unwillingness existed, for instance, in exposing the role the Catholic Church had had in the generalised violence perpetrated on young boys, women and children. In fact, there were critics (Fintan O'Toole and Declan Kiberd) and a writer (John Banville) "who all decried the state of the Celtic Tiger[31] literature as disconnected from its contemporary economic and social dynamics" (Cahill, 2018: 426). Most people did not want to be entertained with fiction that dealt with the past; they were much keener on the glittering present and the (purportedly) even brighter future represented by more popular writers (*ibidem*: 428). The "active forgetting" or the "amnesiac drive" of 1990s' Ireland is looked at critically by some writers, such as Anne Enright, Edna O'Brien and, evidently, by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. (*ibidem*, 430-1)

[28] Eavan Boland (1944-2020) was an "Irish poet and literary critic whose expressive verse explored familiar domestic themes and examined both the isolation and the beauty of being a woman, wife, and mother." (in https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eavan-Boland, accessed om 1.7.2023) She was also one of the few women to be included in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* organized by Seamus Deane in 1990.

[29] Mary Robinson (1944-), the first woman president in Ireland, was elected in 1990 and, according to Britannica.com, "she did much to communicate a more modern image of Ireland" (Marsh, 2023: n.p.)

[30] This idiom is much favoured by the author, as will be seen further on.

[31] Period of rapid economic growth in Ireland, between 1994, when the term was coined by Morgan Stanley, and 2008, when the Stock Market in the US crashed, and the recession was declared.

It is in this historical context that the life and work of Ní Dhuibhne takes form: she will not turn a blind eye to the issues that in the Ireland of the 1970s conditioned the development of teenage girls (and boys), in which she herself was included, as we shall see when we look at the works that have a more evident autobiographical undercurrent, especially *Blood and Water* (1988) and *The Dancers Dancing* (1999). Neither will she ignore those issues that in the 1980s and the 1990s continued to be overlooked, for, even though Ireland was changing, some of the violence committed against women and children during the first fifty years of the Republic (by the Church in cahoots with the State) were only then becoming known or more widely discussed. As she will not disregard the new problems arising from the quick pace of the changes brought about by the Celtic Tiger.

1.2 - From reading girl to woman writer

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's interest in stories, in literature in general but especially fiction, started early in her life, as she claims in *Look! It's a Woman Writer! Irish Literary Feminisms. 1970-2020* (2021). In her own words (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 136), she is and has been a compulsive reader from a very early age. Born in 1954 in Crumlin, Dublin, and growing up in Ranelagh, Dublin, in a working-class family context (her father was a carpenter, and her mother was a housewife) could have meant a different outcome, as her parents had both left school at fourteen. However, her mother encouraged Ní Dhuibhne to develop the interest her daughter showed in books, in reading and, a bit later, in writing them. She read stories to her children (*ibidem*: 137) and, as soon as they could read, had them join the local library.

Ní Dhuibhne's education and her early wish to become a writer were valued, both at home and at school. At around nine, thus encouraged, she already saw herself as a writer (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Kelly, 2000: 349). Her parents, especially her mother, wished for a better life for the children, although money was obviously an issue (Ní Dhuibhne 2021: 137) in a working-class family in the 1960s. This period of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's life is captured in the story "Bikes I've Lost" (Ni Dhuibhne, 2012: 124): Helen's and her siblings' education, although a financial strain on the family, is represented as a priority to her mother. Other examples of autobiographical elements in her fiction will be dealt with further on when, for example, *Blood and Water* (1988) and *The Dancers Dancing* (1999), are briefly discussed.

Besides being stimulated by her mother, the fact that Ní Dhuibhne is bilingual in Irish and English is also relevant to her development as a writer. She learnt Irish from her father, and although at home the family spoke mostly English (cf. Wightman, 2006: 256), the schools she attended were Irish speaking (Perry, 1993: 246). However much this dualism may have had an influence on her development as a writer, it lay fallow throughout most of her education. The author mentions on some occasions (*ibidem*: 247) feeling embarrassed of her parents and her background, or even actually ashamed[32] (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 104). Although they lived in a middle-class neighbourhood, they were in fact working-class, which meant that they were (or felt) displaced in terms of class.

Strangely enough with her *Gaeltacht*[33] background (at least on holidays, in her father's Donegal), the author was not exposed to traditional storytelling, at least not at its usual "venue [,] […] the fireside during the long winter nights" (Ó Súilleabháin, 1973: 8), nor was her family much inclined to that inheritance, according to what she tells Donna Perry in an interview: "They didn't tell traditional tales or anything." (Perry, 1993: 248) It could, I believe, be related to the family's disconnectedness with their roots, either through emigration (her father was an emigrant in Scotland and England in his twenties), or because they made their living in a south-Dublin suburb, or even because of her mother's wish to socially promote her children and of the fact that her own background was suburban, not rural. Her father, however, shared some of his childhood stories (*ibidem*), although not in the traditional way mentioned above.

Her apparent indifference to, or even shame of, her Irish background led her to study English at graduate level. In fact, her academic interests focused primarily on English literature and on the study of "Pure English" (Kelly, 2000: 349), as Old English was referred to then. During her graduate years at UCD, she learnt to use the analytical tools of the New Criticism approach to literature[34], which for her meant the dissection of texts and the search for hidden meaning: "[w]e pulled poems apart as if they were toads in a lab. The general idea was that there was always at least one subtext in any piece of writing and if you dug deep enough you would find out what it was." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 132) This view of the literary text inspired

[32] Cf. *infra*, Section 1.3.

[33] Parts of Ireland where many people speak Irish (Gaelic) as a first language. Some of them are Donegal in the North, close to the boarder with Northern Ireland (UK), Connemara (the biggest area) in the centre West coast, and the Dingle Peninsula in the Southwest coast.

[34] Literary critical theory developed during the first half of the 20th century by, among others, I. A. Richards (1893-1979), William Empson (1906-1984) and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), which emphasised the close analytical reading of texts independently of any reference to its author or historical context.

her, in her own work, to disguise meaning, to codify her stories and to hide the key: "[b]y learning how to read between the lines I figured out how to write between them, to create a surface and a subtext at the same time." (*ibidem*, 133)

Only at post-graduate level did she start looking at other "roots of literature", in some "still deeper and older layer of narrative" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Tallone, 2017: 155), besides the usual written canon, namely folklore and the oral tradition. This refocusing also occurred when she "discovered feminism", in the 1980s (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 145).

When searching for the origins of story, of narrative, of literature (*ibidem*, 140), she came to perceive that much had happened before *Beowulf*,[35] before written literature. She realised, when working on her PhD, that her knowledge of Irish and of her background, much more than encumbrances, were stepping-stones into the world of folklore, specifically folk tales in the oral tradition: for her doctoral thesis Ní Dhuibhne researched the influence of international folk tales in one of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*[36] (Ní Dhuibhne, 2018: 143). During her twenties she went back to her father's Donegal (*ibidem*: 49), where she had spent holidays in her infancy years, to collect folk tales with her PhD tutor, Bo Almqvist, head of the folklore department at UCD and later her husband. In addition to that, she spent a year in Denmark studying international folk tales for her doctorate, as well as learning Danish.

This work gave her insight into the influence that oral storytelling has on written literature and into the transnationality of the reach of folk tales, since not only the themes but also the structure of folk tales (fairy tales, myths and legends), specifically its symbolic language, pervade most world literature (Cardigos, 1996: 14), as is the case of most of Ní Dhuibhne's literary creations, her short stories and her novels. In fact, a distinctive feature of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is her use of folktales as a counterpoint to contemporary stories, which "illustrate[s] the multiple palimpsests underneath contemporary reality" (Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 101). The intertextual use of folk tales or fairy tale motifs foregrounds the author's hybridity, as does her use of her name in Irish, and lends her a very peculiar or distinctive Irishness.[37]

[35] Epic poem, thought to have been written in the 8th century, and considered to be the highest example of Old English literature and the first written one, although the probability of its oral origins is also taken into account.

[36] Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400), best-known for authoring *The Canterbury Tales*, and for using Middle English when French or Latin were the preferred languages. Ní Dhuibhne wrote a story, "The Wife of Bath", based on the character, Alisoun, from that tale, mainly setting the perspective of its protagonist as counterpoint to that of a dissatisfied contemporary wife. (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2007b: 31-43; and *infra* p. 21 and *passim*)

[37] Cf. *infra*, Section 2.2.

Also colouring her Irishness is her bilingualism, which helped her bridge the gap with the past, as well as other gaps: according to Patricia Coughlan, bilingual Irish women writers, such as Ní Dhuibhne[38], use their hybridity as "cultural mediation in contemporary Irish culture, between past and present, the West and the city, older social forms and the still-emerging present" (Coughlan, 2004: 181). The control over both Irish and English, as well as her academic endeavours in the field of international folklore, set Ní Dhuibhne on the path of "tradition": it allowed her to bring to her writing, concerned with contemporary Ireland, the past of folklore reinforced by her creative use of folk tales.

1.3 - From "Green Fuse" to "Little Red": an overview

An overview is described by the Cambridge Online Dictionary as "a short description of something that provides general information about it but no details". That is my idea here, to describe shortly most of the published work of the author. Therefore, I will be zooming in on some details from the several short stories and novels of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, when those details prove useful for my reading of *The Shelter*, especially (but not only) of those stories which I elected as the most representative of the collection.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne started publishing in 1973. Her first published story, "Green Fuse"[39], brought out under the pseudonym Elizabeth Dean, deals with "sexual desire", an issue which will recur in many of her stories, as claimed by the author herself (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 135), and how it contributes to her affirmation of herself as a woman. She continued to publish stories, mainly by the hand of David Marcus[40] (Wightman, 2006: 256). Her first collection under her best-known name[41] was published in 1988, *Blood and Water*. In it we find many of the stories which made Ní Dhuibhne famous, such as "Midwife to the Fairies", "Fulfillment" and "Blood and Water" (among others). The title story is marked by autobiographical elements which

[38] Another contemporary famous example is Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, author of two well-known collections of poems, in which motifs from folklore, notably mermaids, are also used intertextually: *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1993) and *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007).

[39] This story was, in my opinion, "revisited" in the story "Sweet Sacrament Divine" from *Eating Women is not Recommended* (1991).

[40] Vd. *supra* footnote No. 14 (p. 4).

[41] She is also known as Elizabeth O'Hara, writer of children's books, and as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne-Almqvist, academically. Her English name is Elizabeth Deeney. (cf. Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 103; Ní Dhuibhne, 1999b: 48)

would later, greatly altered and expanded, become her first novel, *The Dancers Dancing* (1999). In this, a *Bildungsroman*[42], the same character, Orla, is growing up in an urban *milieux* a few notches above her family's financial means, bringing that social tension with her to the *Gaeltacht* school located in Donegal (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2010: 96). When asked by Christine St. Peter, in an interview, how much of Orla was young Éilís, the author replied "[q]uite a lot" (St. Peter, 2006: 71) and went on to explain:

> It is based loosely on a visit to the Gaeltacht which I made when I was eleven or twelve. I changed the ages of the characters — they are older in the novel than they were in reality. I also changed the date of the visit from sometime in the 1960s to 1972, since that suited one aspect of the novel, its concern with The Troubles in the North. […] It's a mixture of memoir and fiction.

In both texts, "Blood and Water" and *The Dancers Dancing*, the author, while fictionalising aspects of her life, enacts her personal conflict with her background, her feelings and positioning relative to issues of tradition, folklore, superstition, class, the Irish language, postcolonialism and Irishness. The same mortification Orla feels towards her aunt Annie in "Blood and Water" and her insalubrious and incomprehensible ways (only later in life does the character realise that the smudge on the wall is butter purposefully daubed there, as an offering to the faeries, to help the churned butter settle properly) returns when she cannot bring herself to help her fallen awkward aunt and leaves her for dead in *The Dancers Dancing*. Only when she understands that her aunt is a respected storyteller in the community does she relent: "Orla represents the postcolonial Irish who are ashamed of their Irishness. [What she does] is what Irish people in general do to the Irish language — they let it die […] if an outsider […] suggests that Irish is a valuable cultural commodity, they are liable to agree" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 104). Language is another example of an aspect of Irishness being problematised in a postcolonial Ireland which wants to carry on into the future not quite sure of what it wants to take with it.

In the novel, at the language level, the hybridity that underlies the conflicts in Orla — she is both ashamed of and at home in Irish — is portrayed in the chapter "A traditional Irish schoolhouse": "Repeat the pupils the sentences after her, and then learn they them by clean mind. And they learning by clean mind it is able with you to hear their brains working, like to a machine a-humming, even only over the curtain. Pleasant comforting sound it is." (Ní

[42] A novel in which the development of a character, from an early age onwards, is represented: "The term was first used in 1803 by K. Morgenstern […] [, and it] centres the process of the protagonist's inner development in his/her confrontations with events that are exterior and represents the conflict between the I and the world" (Flora, 2009: s.p.).

Dhuibhne, 1999a: 36) The feel of speaking and thinking in Irish is represented as something enjoyable and attractive to the children, although their urban posturing during the novel makes them use only English amongst themselves. In the end, Orla comes to accept Irish and her aunt and what she represents (traditional rural Ireland) as a part of who she is that she will integrate in her complex self. However, the recuperation of tradition that Orla's development represents does not go in the way of either suggesting a return to the past or a commodification, via tourism, of that tradition. Rather, according to Patricia Coughlan, Orla "[recapitulates a] […] process of self-understanding and cultural intertwining" (Coughlan, 2004: 191) that reinforces her identity in her hybridity between the rural and the urban.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's first stories, going back to *Blood and Water*, could then be said to echo the world she saw around her and how she assimilated and then shared that world. They in fact already introduce the thematic focus, places and problematics that will accompany her fictional production throughout her career: female sexual desire; man/woman relationships and how, in them, female dissatisfaction is represented; the intertextual use of folk tales; the juggling of the ambiguous relationship she has with Ireland (cf. Wightman, 2006: 257). Some examples of this thematic focus will be the aforementioned "Midwife to the Fairies", but also "Fulfillment" and "The Postmen's Strike".[43]

The first of these examples portrays a contemporary Irish midwife, represented as a Hiberno-English woman, who is taken from her urban 1980s setting to a rural one to assist a young girl bearing a child. Later she comes to know that the baby dies and is threatened to be silent about it. Interspersed in this story is a folk tale, "Midwife to the Fairies" (ML5070)[44], also known as "The Midwife Who Lost an Eye", of a midwife taken to fairyland to do the same thing and who is blinded so as not to be able to report on what she saw. The story is, in the author's own words, precisely "about turning a blind eye, being silent, which would have been the general attitude" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 108): the fairies, in the legend, poke the midwife's eye out so she could not report what she saw, an event of infanticide. At a subtextual level, an Irish reader would recall a piece of news of 1984, known as the Kerry Babies case, in which a woman, Joanna Hayes, was wrongfully accused of murdering her newborn baby. This tripartite layering of folklore, news story and contemporary story, or various narratives within a story strategy, will, as we shall see later, recur in one of the short

[43] The issues will recur in three of the four stories I shall be discussing: "The Man Who Had No Story", "It is a Miracle" and "The Blind" (cf. *infra* Chapter 3).

[44] Cf. Cárthaigh, 1991: 133.

stories of *The Shelter*. "Midwife to the Fairies" foregrounds the effects of pregnancies on Irish women at a time when abortion was forbidden and women's bodies were written over by the dominant Catholic ideology, as I have discussed above (cf. Section 1.1).

"Fulfillment" portrays the mental struggle of dealing and surviving the dreary cold urban environment[45], which is intertextually combined with an urban legend, according to which some restaurants, usually foreign, sell dog meat as any other meat. The legend (type A4) is described by Ní Dhuibhne in her 1983 essay "Dublin Modern Legends: An Intermediate Type List and Examples." This story's narrator wishes to lead a free and fulfilling life, out of "the slavery of a nine-to-five position […] without deference to the will of an authoritative, pettifogging bureaucracy" (Ní Dhuibhne, 1988: 134-5), which takes her unwittingly to transpose the limits of sanity and to feel entirely justified in doing so. This character represents a mentally imbalanced and unreliable narrator which, combined with the representation of Ireland as a dystopian arid location where life is impossible, from the story "The Postmen's Strike", reappears in the form of Robin in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's first novel, *The Bray House*, published in 1990.

The originality of that novel in Irish literature caused many disparate kinds of mostly dismissive reviews. Despite being generally seen as a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*[46], Val Nolan describes it as "a work of speculative fiction which yokes together the seemingly contradictory concerns of the Gaelic literary tradition and contemporary Irish anxiety about vulnerabilities to the British nuclear energy industry" (Nolan, 2021: 1), making it significant as a meditation on contemporary Ireland. The author goes on to clarify his position, sustaining it with the knowledge Ní Dhuibhne surely had of the Irish oral tradition: "*The Bray House* is classified as a work of post-apocalyptic fiction, one which owes its unusual structure to the familiarity of Ní Dhuibhne — a doctoral trained folklorist — with aspects of the Irish oral tradition". (*ibidem*) Robin, the protagonist, who aims at a major archeological discovery, ends up unearthing nothing worthwhile and disappearing in disgrace from the academic scene where she hoped to shine, and in the process committing murder. The voyage of discovery by sea, a plot structure from the Irish oral tradition (cf. *ibidem*: 8), to narrate Ireland idealistically, is

[45] An issue present in "The Shelter of Neighbours" (cf. *infra* Chapter 3), but also in other stories of the collection, namely "Trespasses" and "Red-Hot Poker".

[46] Published in 1719, *Robinson Crusoe*, by Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), narrates the shipwreck on a desert island and became very popular at the time of publication, and continues to be so. Raising different complex issues, and open to many interpretations, still today, it is said to be loosely based on the true story Alexandre Selkirk, a Scottish sailor marooned on a desert island in 1704. On that, but also on other sources, cf. Little, 2016: s.p.

curtailed by the inability of the protagonist / narrator to accept and incorporate other possibilities of description. Furthermore, following the author's nuclear anxieties about Sellafield (cf. Kelly, 2000: 349) and, a scenario also present in "The Postmen's Strike", a feeling of claustrophobia towards Ireland as "a country and a people laid to waste, […] horribly damaged people, the walking wounded, carrying the consequences of […] disaster from one generation to the next" (*ibidem*), both dystopian representations of Ireland result in another thematic focus typical of Ní Dhuibhne: the criticism of Ireland from the outside, mostly from a Scandinavian country where her characters usually exile to seek refuge from what Val Nolan describes, while discussing Robin's report on the society the disaster made away with, as "a furious discontent with Irish gender and spatial politics as encapsulated in urban domesticity". (Nolan, 2021:11)[47]

In her next collection, *Eating Women is not Recommended* (1991), Ní Dhuibhne returns to the difficulties of incorporating the traditional in the contemporary, an issue explored in her first collection, *Blood and Water*, and in her first novel, *The Dancers Dancing*. In the story "The Bright Lights", the protagonist, on the verge of having to kiss the corpse of an uncle already redolent of putrefaction, reflects on how to juggle the same identity issues that Orla felt: "[…] my own life, governed by traditional country people, old-fashioned maybe, in some ways, but with the power of adaptation. Intelligent and sensitive to change as my school-friends' parents could not be." (Ní Dhuibhne, 1991: 36) That "adaptation", the overcoming of the feeling of shame "of my mother and father" (*ibidem*: 35), a recurrent autobiographic note already mentioned, can only happen precisely through escape: the self-recreation through escape to an educated and artistic urban environment, and later the return and reassessment of the layers of past in the self, although painful, results in a sort of possible happiness. Nevertheless, when flight is impossible and the pressures of duty to family are inescapable, madness supervenes.

It is what happens in the story "The Flowering". The character, Sally Rua, an imagined ancestor of the narrator, goes mad when she is unable to have some moments of peace and quiet to spend in the only activity, crochet, or "flowering", in which she distinguishes herself from her peers and relatives. This skill, at which she excels even her teacher, could provide her with enough income to guarantee her independence. However, according to the social rules of the

[47] Later, in *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* (1997), in *The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Stories* (2000) and in *Midwife to the Fairies: New and Selected Stories* (2003), there are other examples of Irish women who have lived or still live outside Ireland casting critical looks on the country (e.g., "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams"). In *The Shelter* there are two examples in which this issue is developed: "The Moon Shines Clear, The Horseman's Here" and "It Is a Miracle".

time, she has to "take her place" both towards her family and the local politics, when her father and brother, the providers of the family, die. Sally Rua has to suppress her newly found identity as an exquisite flowerer and follow the social strictures of family and class. Although she is an exceedingly good artisan, the patriarchal mores dictate that she become merely a daughter and a servant, another nameless and futureless cog in the social structure where she was born.[48] This story, as well as "The Wife of Bath", "Eating Women is not Recommended" (where the narrator of "The Flowering" returns) and "The Mermaid Legend", are the strongest of this collection, and together with the others mentioned before foreground the author's main themes and concerns. In the latter, however, the feminist position becomes more assertive, as it reconfigures self-effacing motherhood into a woman who chooses her freedom over the socially naturalised role of mother.

Exile in her own country or abroad often represents a woman's displacement in a context of male domination. Quoting Eavan Boland, Ailbh Smyth refers to "'the power of nationhood to edit the realities of womanhood'" and goes on further to comment that "the hard fact for Irish women is that our voices have been overwhelmed […] by the needs of the nation as by the dictates of the patriarch".[49] Remarkable in this respect is the story "The Mermaid Legend". In it a folktale is juxtaposed in the text to a contemporary story, to, in Ní Dhuibhne's words, "deepen the meaning and enhance the aesthetic" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 210). Although in her essay Ní Dhuibhne is referring to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's collection of poems *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007), the description is doubly relevant. The poems use precisely the same motif of the legend quoted by Ní Dhuibhne, and, because in the case of the story (and of the poems) the same theme of "displacement, cultural and linguistic alienation" (*ibidem*) is explored. The protagonist and narrator, being "abducted" (taken from her element — England) by an Irish man, marries him and has two girls. As she cannot adapt to her life there, she flees, "divorce Irish style" (Ní Dhuibhne, 1991: 173), and is confronted by guilt: "[a] rat is what I feel like, now" (*ibidem*). Nevertheless, she does not go back on her decision, on herself, as "I'm a sea girl myself" (*ibidem*: 175), thus refusing suppression and exile from her own natural element.

[48] "The Flowering" was, I think, staged in 1994 as *Dún na mBan trí Thine* (The Women's Fort is on Fire), and it develops the issue of thwarted female creativity incorporating several folk tales, e.g., "The Woman as Hare" and "The Mermaid Legend". (Cf. O'Connor, 2015: 92 & 99)

[49] Eavan Boland's 1995 poem "Mother Ireland" portrays the way in which women's bodies and consequently their selves were taken as property: "I did not see. /I was seen.", and how when she "could tell [her] […] story / It was different / from the story told about [her] […]" (Boland, 1995: 12).

Exile from herself in her own micro-community (marriage) is an issue explored in "The Wife of Bath", a story which also deploys the strategic intertextuality with a literary text, in this case the homonymous tale from *The Canterbury Tales* (cf. *supra* footnote No. 32), as well as alluding to the novelist Jane Austen[50]. In this story a dissatisfied wife and mother meets, on a journey with her distant husband and troublesome son to Bath, the character Alisoun from the Tale mentioned above, now as a bartender in a contemporary pub. The woman, who calls herself Maureen but confesses that that is not her name[51], is aware (as is Alisoun) that the latter is a character, not real. The boundaries of verisimilitude are metafictionally stretched thin, as both women discuss Alisoun's shockingly pragmatical opinions concerning marriage over some pints. Maureen, although she says, "You didn't even exist, for heaven's sake: you are just a figment of some man's imagination" (*ibidem*: 100), keeps the conversation going, talks about her marriage and defends Jane Austen's characters' efforts to get married, claiming as well to be a feminist (*ibidem*: 96). The story appears to foreground both the irrationality of living a life in a relationship which is deeply unsatisfying and, at the same time, the delusional efforts one puts into maintaining the narrative that those kinds of relationships, with uninterested and uninteresting men, are possible (in the sense of having a future). The reading is further reinforced as, not only the character (Alisoun), but also the "real" person ("Maureen") dissolve in the waters of Aquae Sulis[52]. Maureen is after all also "a figment of some[one's (a woman's)] […] imagination". Furthermore, she echoes the character from "The Mermaid Legend" when she realises, enraptured, that "water [lifts] the gravity from any mortal thing" (*ibidem*: 104)[53] and manages to escape the social pressures of the accepted behaviour configured in her marriage to the tyrannically indifferent Jim.

In Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's two following collections, *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* (1997) and *The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Stories* (2000), the author approaches just that,

[50] In her novels, Jane Austen (1775-1817) recurrently represents through her protagonists her contemporary women's plight of having to marry to attain financial security and hence social promotion and respectability.

[51] To the best of my knowledge, there is only another story ("Illumination", from *The Shelter*) in which the protagonist's name is unknown. This fact is curious, as "Maureen" is also unclear as to what her *metier* is, although the reader deduces that she is a writer: "To weave, perhaps? Weave what? Am I a weaver? Maureen the weaver. Is that who I am?" (Ní Dhuibhne, 1991: 96) Embroidery, albeit unclearly, is confused with writing. The character of "Illumination" knows she is a writer, but she does not know what to write, or fears that writing is only repetition.

[52] *Aquae Sulis* was the Roman name of what later became Bath.

[53] In Chapter 3, in the discussion of "It Is a Miracle" the relevance of water (and mermaids) on a symbolic level will be further discussed.

the power of men over women, how women must fight to establish their space and subjective voice, and the kind of weapons available to them in an unfair fight.

Between the different stories of *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* the author interpolated an Irish retelling of the international tale "Beauty and the Beast", namely the folktale "The Story of the Little White Goat" (D'hoker, 2016: 184), which tells of the power a man exerts over a woman as he uses the dependency her love for him creates. At the same time, it represents the duality in men stereotypically represented both as gentle when conquering and brutal after satisfied. Confronted with it, the women characters also face a dual pull in themselves: attraction for both gentleness and brutality and from it the consequences for the self as they accept or reject either self-respect or self-destruction. The stories between the different installments of the folktale look at how, in diverse ways, women try to deal with these conflicting forces, and represent them, the women, as struggling to extricate their own voices or territories, their agency, from the forceful power men exert in their patriarchal subjugations: "Ní Dhuibhne thus foregrounds both the protagonist's desire—in her all-consuming passion for her animal lover—and her independent agency, as she finally takes her life into her own hands again." (*ibidem*)

The story "Summer Pudding" approaches the Famine in a historiographic metafictional way. The story describes fictional events that could have happened in a specific historical period (the mid-nineteenth century Famine in Ireland, from which the two girls, Mary and Ellen, the narrator, escape to Wales), while at the same time problematising historiographic representation in its metafictional moments ("The hunger and the fever were the same thing, although people like to think they were different" (Ní Dhuibhne, 1997: 55), says the narrator, before lying about fever in her village and thus telling a story acceptable to the coloniser ear represented by the Ladies of Llongollen.[54] This constitutes what Linda Hutcheon defines as historiographic metafiction: works which are "both intensely self-reflexive and paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon *apud* Mambrol, 2016: n.p.). An historical period is both represented and questioned, and a criticism of how that history was told is made, by foregrounding possible fabrications of truth and, in this case, the silencing of women and the real effects of the Famine. According to Caitriona Moloney, "'Summer Pudding' illustrates how, like colonised subjects, women have at times colluded in their own misrepresentations in

[54] Eleanor Butler (1739–1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755–1831) were two Irish upper-class women, who lived together as a couple. They escaped to Wales to be free from their scandalised families, and there "created a space for the expression of sexual identity that might today be called lesbian [in] a viable alternative to the impositions of patriarchal domestic arrangements." (Reynolds *apud* Wills, 2020)

history. The story uses the Great Potato Famine (or Hunger) of 1845-1852 to dramatise how history is fabricated in times of great stress and how, in such times, "women can collude in their own erasure from history" (Moloney, 2007: 3). This concurs with Linda Hutcheon's view of historiographic metafiction as foregrounding "art's critical relation to the 'world' of discourse — and beyond that to society and politics" (Hutcheon, n.d.: 28), in the sense that the story represents a view of history as discourse and thus subject to a judgement of verisimilitude, as is the case with fiction, rather than as a matter of truth, as is expected of historiography. Indeed, in "'The Pastime of Past Time': Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction", Hutcheon states that "they [history and fiction] are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalised in their narrative forms" (Hutcheon, 1995: 54). As in other stories, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne brings together, in "Summer Pudding", threads from history, travel narrative[55], and, according to Moloney, Irish legend[56], to write a story which precisely foregrounds that, the constructedness of stories (and history) and how our perceptions of reality can be affected by their adaptability to whatever perspective is authoring them.

In *The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Stories* (2000), the dominant issue seems to be exile brought about by spatial as well as by inner displacement. The title story, set in turn-of-the-century North America during the gold rush to Alaska, focuses on Sophie. The character is represented as not satisfied with her lot, and therefore she enacts many forms of escape: she tries to escape the destined fate of becoming a house maid – that was one of the jobs available at the time for girls of her class – by marrying a stranger she meets on the ship to America; the journey itself is an escape from a hard life in Ireland, significantly on a ship named "Maid of Erin", which is an allusion to the "Manchester Martyrs"[57], as Sophie will try to free herself from the expectations her husband brought from Ireland and seeks to inscribe on her (colonise her);

[55] The use of George Barrow's travel narrative serves the purpose of foregrounding the denial of "the culpability of the Catholic Church" (Moloney, 2007: 5) in assisting Ireland during the Famine period, as does the fact, noted by Ní Dhuibhne, that Barrow "[didn't mention or note] something so enormously important in history" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 110).

[56] "Ní Dhuibhne's story also contains several elements that suggest similarities with the old Irish tale, "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu," for example, exile, adultery, a false friend, and an adventurous, visionary, and sexually assertive woman as the main character." (Moloney, 2007: 5)

[57] "The Manchester Martyrs were William Allen, Michael Larkin and Michael O'Brien, all born in Ireland but living in Manchester and active Fenians. In 1867, after a most dubious trial, they were executed for their part in a successful ambush to free two Fenian leaders from a prison van in which a policeman was shot dead." (Doyle, 2014: n.p.) *The Maid of Erin* was an actual ship employed in transporting immigrants, but it is also a statue erected in commemoration of the Manchester Martyrs (cf. https://www.tipperarytown.ie/places/the-maid-of-erin/, accessed on 11.04.2023). The statue evokes both the personification of Ireland and the Virgin Mary and alludes to the fight for the republic against colonial rule. Sophie, a maid from Ireland, who escaped a life of being a maid in a house, ends up having to fight her husband's colonising attitudes against herself.

she has an illicit relationship with another symbol of forced inscription, a Blackfoot Indian[58]; she has aspirations to become a teacher; and she dresses differently from the rest of the immigrant women in the village. All the different modes of escape Sophie[59] enacts reinforce how she herself represents America: "a word she had carried in her head for a long time. A word, a dream, and a hope" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2000: 3). Sophie desires a new life, but the life she finds in the real America, a "word becoming land and lights and buildings in front of her eyes" (*ibidem*), even as she and her husband travel westwards, is not different from the one she left behind in the old country. She is first surrounded by Irish people and their mores, although Philadelphia was full of people from other nationalities (*ibidem*: 8), and later in Montana she ends up controlled by Ned. In the end she finds herself when she wraps herself in a sealskin coat (*ibidem*: 15), an allusion to the mermaid legend, as it represents how a woman out of her element finds what was taken away from her: her coat, in the Irish version of the legend (cf. *supra* the discussion of "The Mermaid Legend"), her agency and her subjectivity – a way out of a subaltern position. She feels a connection with the place, with *natura naturans* (*ibidem*: 27), and that connection affords her sexual satisfaction, a home and the realisation of America finally as a livable dream (*ibidem*: 30) in her relationship with North Wind. However, the impossibility of fulfillment (as she is separated from North Wind and her baby from him dies), as in the story "The Flowering", brings with it madness.

The importance of physical love for women and of the ability to express it freely is again approached in the stories "At Sally's Gap" and "Oleander". In "Sex in the Context of Ireland", it is the "the fall of the Catholic Church from a position of unquestionable authority" (Coughlan, 2004: 176) that is represented, in the wake of the several scandals that came to light during the 1990s in Ireland (cf. Coughlan, 2004: 175-176), concerning, for example, matters of paedophilia and violence to children, perpetrated particularly by Church members. On the one hand, in view of crimes committed against children in convents (in the story it is a nun who teaches Arabella Brazil the trade-value of sex (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2000: 99); on the other, in view of the persecution that the Legion of Mary[60] exerts on prostitutes, while at the same time turning

[58] Today, more than Native or Indigenous American, it is rather the reference to the actual Nation that is the preferred way of referring to the Indigenous Peoples of the US. Unless the person her- or himself says differently. Only when used by itself is the word Indian either a misnomer or an offence when applied to an Indigenous Person (cf. https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/faq/did-you-know, accessed on 19.06.2023).

[59] Her name itself is the only non-Gaelic / English of the lot of characters' names, together with North Wind.

[60] The Legion of Mary was founded in Dublin in 1921 by Frank Duff. It had a very active role during the Republic in spreading the cult of Mary and the consequent meek and self-sacrificing representation of womanhood. Duff features as a character in the story. (Cf. e.g., Ní Dhuibhne, 2000: 94)

a blind eye to the fact that the same State officials who uphold the Catholic Church as the State religion resort to their services. Finally, it is implied how these same State officials, in cahoots with the convents and the Magdalene Homes, sell babies taken from prostitutes and other "fallen" women or girls to American families[61]. The story portrays Ireland not as an image of the Virgin Mary but rather as a prostitute who sells herself to America.

Midwife to the Fairies (2003) is a collection that offers a retrospective of Ní Dhuibhne's most recognised short fiction and, especially in the first and last stories, "Wuff, Wuff, Wuff for de Valera" and "Peacocks", brings to the fore the effects the Celtic Tiger was having or starting to have on Irish social dynamics and psyche. Already in the previous collection, for instance in "The Banana Boat", one gets the idea that the economic affluence has had an impact on travelling and on the social structures represented, as well as on teenagers' behaviour. Also, many of the seaside old houses have become summer houses for affluent foreigners and the Irish rich; the characters travel and spend more; the teenagers are represented as bored with the past (not ashamed as Orla had been, a few decades earlier), and only caring for globalised entertainment. In "Wuff, Wuff, Wuff for de Valera" and "Peacocks" the ease of travelling has become ordinary as have the different socio-economic structures (single mothers, working women, divorce, class mobility).

Similarly, the world represented in the continuously flowing blabber of the narrator of "Wuff Wuff Wuff for de Valera", *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* (2007) "portrays a society where consumers are never satiated and people lack meaningful inner lives" (Ingman, 2013: 241). The same moral hesitation created in the reader's mind at the end of "Wuff Wuff Wuff for de Valera"[62] is represented in Anna. Her hesitant behaviour provokes questions such as "[d]oes [the end of the novel] suggest Anna's loss of sanity in her ability to remember words, the tools of her trade? Or does her retreat to Annaghmakerrig[63] represent a liberation from the hollowness of her life that will finally allow her to write something real?" (*ibidem*) Or even: why is Anna spared and Kate killed? Is it because Anna is better equipped to read and interpret symbols (the scarecrow as banshee), has more *authority*, than the sickly, submissive Kate? Does it entail a

[61] This historical fact is portrayed in Benjamin Black's *Chirstine Falls* (2007), the first in the Quirke series by John Banville.

[62] Would one, in Pauline's sister's position concerning asking Conor for a loan and risking losing him, behave the same or differently? And how would one live with it? Cruelly and indifferently? Or with a heavy conscience?

[63] The Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig, an "artists' retreat […] where writers can apply for a two-week stay in order to write in a peaceful surrounding" (Wulff, 2017: xviii). Éilís Ní Dhuibhne herself wrote her juvenile fiction novel *The Uncommon Cormorant* there. (Kelly, 2000: 349).

certain level of cruelty or indifference to survive in contemporary Ireland? Or, seen from another point of view, could it mean that to *read* this cruelly indifferent Ireland you need to be in it and out (the dual exile mentioned above)[64], as is the beggar silently criticising Anna's blindness throughout the novel? Be that as it may, the novel raises the question of how to understand "the fate of artistic endeavour in a culture increasingly defined by consumption and commodification" (Hand, 2020: 540).

In *The Shelter* (2012) the literary world and the role of the writer are also two of the thematic lines present in the stories. The other is the cruelty and indifference detected in suburban settings as opposed to an (imagined) memory of better times lived in rural locations, perceived as "communities", which would apparently have collapsed under the new mores of a wealthier Ireland. The dichotomy is problematised from different angles in the sequence of the Dunroon Crescent stories – a group of six stories (plus one) in the book –, as will be discussed further down (cf. *infra* Chapter 3).

There are other themes developed in the collection, as for instance in the story "The Moon Shines Clear, The Horseman's Here", where Ní Dhuibhne juxtaposes a traditional story with a contemporary one, thereby "show[ing] a desire to reconcile tradition and modernity" (Dessaint-Payard, 2014: 48). In referring to *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, Rosende Pérez says mostly the same, Ní Dhuibhne "reveal[s] the multiple threads that may bond together past and present" (Pérez, 2010: 39). She goes further to argue that the intertextual play that Ní Dhuibhne frequently enacts, in the case paralleling Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, "[questions] the very notion of the sequential nature of the terms" (*ibidem*), past and present. In *The Shelter* the narratives that shade the present also colour the past, as when the character Mitzi, in the title story, both says "you belonged not just to your family, but to a community" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012 : 120) and "[s]ome tart from Poland got her mitts on him" (*ibidem*: 121); or when she shows compassion towards a civil servant by staying with Martha's dying son while at the same time blaming civil servants for the downfall of the economy to which she herself contributes with her speculative entrepreneurship.

The two "Celtic Tiger works", *The Shelter* and the novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, do indeed "[engage] with the productive influence of previously literary history upon contemporary works loosely mirroring the potentially productive emergence of past history in

[64] Vd. *supra* p. 20. and *passim*.

the constructions of the contemporary world" (Pérez, 2010: 39). This productive intertextuality is precisely what is at stake in what I term yarns of community, as will become evident later.

In her next collection, *Selected Stories* (2017), Ní Dhuibhne brings the matter of writing and the role of the writer and the intertextual evocation (or interweaving of literary tradition) to the fore. As Martina Evans, in her *Irish Times* review states, "writers haunt these pages", or, when referring to "The Banana Boat" she underscores the author's "seamlessly weaving in local writers like Peig Sayers […] so that Irish and English language stories are part of the same tapestry" (Evans, 2017: n.p.). The collection brings together many of the aforementioned stories, and included in previous collections, as well as new stories, such as "City of Literature" which, as "A Literary Lunch", parodies the literary world.

It took Ní Dhuibhne four years, after the death of her husband, folklorist Bo Almqvist, to publish this collection. During those years she did not write much fiction. Instead, she composed a recollection of her life with her husband, what Dermot Bolger calls "a loving reclamation, taking back possession of the totality of Almqvist's life" (Bolger, 2018: n.p.), which she published in 2018 under the title *12,000 Days: A Memoir of Love and Loss*.

Her most recent collection of stories is *Little Red and Other Stories* (2020). In it, lonely and ageing women, in an urban, sometimes violent and (almost) incomprehensible setting, are the protagonists, and, as ever with Ní Dhuibhne, there is a strong autobiographical undercurrent seeping here and there to the surface[65]. Like the feelings that the author herself could still be experiencing, "Its 11 stories feature characters coping with change and crisis, or simply the unfamiliar newness of a situation" (McKervey, 2020: n.p.), and they can be read as representations of women coming to terms with loneliness (whose husbands either died or left) and with old age and its difficulties and possibilities.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne has also published extensively in Irish; nevertheless, due to my inability to read that language, the reference here cannot be other than brief and superficial. The author has published plays in Irish during the 1990s and later, from 2000 onwards, also novels. She published a bestselling crime novel in that year, *Dúnmharú sa Daingean* (*Murder in Dingle*), set in the *Gaeltacht*, which has a follow-up in 2008 in *Dún an Airgid* (*The Fort of Money),* both representative of what Pádraig Ó Siadhail describes as "Gaeilge *Noir*" (Ó

[65] "They are not directly autobiographical, and some of them are totally made up. I believed initially that all the stories were completely different from one another. But they are linked by one thing. Me, the author. Me, the author between 2015 and 2018. Whatever their plot, they reflect my concerns, my moods, my thoughts, during those years. How could it be otherwise?" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2020: n.p.)

Siadhail, 2020: 590). After publishing *Cailíní Beaga Ghleann na mBláth* (*The Little Girls of the Valley of Flowers*) in 2003, "a companion piece to *The Dancers Dancing* (1999)" (*ibidem*), Ní Dhuibhne has written several novels for young people in which some of the issues she deals with in her stories in English are also touched upon.

1.4 - From texts to themes, and back again

From the above overview, it is possible to perceive a pattern of issues which recur, under different forms and across narrative genres, in the work of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and which I will try to summarise here. They help, further on, to better understand the texts I selected to concentrate on from *The Shelter of Neighbours.*

The focus of the author is Irish culture, especially the Ireland whose social dynamics evolved throughout her life. As we have seen, that implies looking at the past (sometimes further back than the 1950s), evoking it, rewriting it, and finally bringing it to bear, in her peculiar way, on the present. It also means that Ireland sometimes becomes a space of dissatisfaction or claustrophobia (dystopia), and that escape (emigration, exile) is inevitable. The focus apparently deviates, at times, either to a Scandinavian country or to America (new utopias) but the look repeatedly turns to Ireland, bearing witness to a strong sense of community in the author. Ireland is thus the macro-community in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's fictions (short stories as well as novels), and it exerts a constant dual force (centripetal and centrifugal), foregrounding what was described (vd. *supra*, Section 1.3, e.g., the discussion of "The Mermaid's Legend") as an inner, as well as an outer displacement.

When Ireland is looked at as a community with a history, the broader focal point is usually either the Catholic Church and the consequences of its actions during the first fifty or so years of the Republic, the so called Éamon de Valera's Ireland. The focus falls usually on how women or children were dealt with by institutions, a focus which is differently coloured according to the historical time and the place in which the different stories are set. This context will be present in the discussion of "The Blind" (vd. *infra*, Chapter 3).

Most of the stories are set in the last three decades of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st, and many deal with the micro-community of the married heterosexual couple or the family. In it the woman is the focal point, and the history of women in Ireland during this period is explored attentively by the author. Sexual desire in girls and in women is

represented as a life force or a wish to express their subjectivity and how it was suppressed by the state- and Church-supported fathers, husbands, and mothers; and how that suppression was hard-fought by women.

That fight is expressed in the stories differently. In some stories girls and women try to find ways of expressing their individuality and agency, gaining control over their lives gradually, supported by each other (which highlights the relevance of friendship between women) or against each other (usually between two different generations); in others, girls and women effect their independence by escaping (to England, to a Scandinavian country, to America) and finding work; in others still the battle to become subjects of their lives is won after first managing an education and escaping later to the same places; occasionally, when the battle is too hard to fight, madness ensues.

However, even when the escape is managed, and when a life of comfort and mutual respect is achieved (usually in Scandinavia), a certain blandness and coldness in the relationship is felt which, albeit in a diverse way, still thwarts female sexuality and desire (freedom and agency), which implies another way of looking at the micro-community of marriage. In this case the marriages are fraternally satisfying, but not passionately so. When this happens (in more recent stories, mostly from 2000 onwards), men (potential lovers) from the European south (stereotypically darker, hairier womanisers) rekindle a sexual desire thought dormant. This aspect will be analysed in the story "It is a Miracle" (vd. *infra*, Chapter 3).

A distinctive mark of Ní Dhuibhne's Irishness, already mentioned and which I will discuss in the next chapter, is her use of folklore. In most of her fiction, she deploys "images or motifs derived from traditional stories (or songs) metaphorically, to extend the meaning of contemporary texts, and atmospherically, to enhance and embellish texture" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 214). We have seen, above and briefly, how the motif of the mermaid is used, for example; how the atmosphere, in "Midwife to the Fairies", is disturbed by the insertion of the fairy tale in the story of a contemporary midwife; or how the different stories about husbands and wives, alternated with parts of "The Search for the Lost Husband", are uncannily given a metaphorical depth and richness that by themselves they would not have. Also, as the author herself claims, "[t]he forms of oral narrative, at either a very elemental level, or at a more developed level, are used in the plot structure of contemporary texts" (*ibidem*). As we will see in depth, in Chapter 3, when "The Man Who Had No Story" is discussed, the plot structure of the homonymous Irish legend forms the foundation on which the contemporary story develops, as a contemporary man is sent hither and thither by the "fairies" in his life.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne has been doing ethnography of a sort, as a writer, not only as a folklorist, and as such is part of another micro-community, which she describes: Irish writers. As a compulsive reader from an early age, writers have been companions in her life and in her writing. They are frequently quoted in her work (weaved in, "Maureen" from "The Wife of Bath" would say), and this feature becomes more apparent in her stories and novel from the 2000s.

Several writers are evoked, especially women (Mary Lavin and Alice Munro in "The Banana Boat" from *The Pale Gold of Alaska*, 2000), but also men. Richard Ford is extensively referred to in "Oleander", from the same collection: his long short stories with their dramatic endings are commented on and the story structure the protagonist comments on is used in this long short story with a dramatic twist at the end (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2000: 174-6). The same use is made of Lavin and Munro in the former story, its story moral in the first instance (*ibidem*: 210), and the plot structure in the second (*ibidem*, 212). It would appear that what Éilís Ní Dhuibhne does is akin to how she describes her use of folktales: "it is an aspect of the imagination and the imagination is the world's greatest thief. It takes in images from all over the place and rearranges them in another way. […] It's a romantic myth that the writer is constantly inventing new stories" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 110-111).

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, satire is "a way of criticising a person, an idea or an institution in which you use humour to show their faults and weaknesses". It is a mode "spanning from polite amusement to angry invective" (Ugolini, 2016: 1), but its aims generally are directed at setting a moral standard through denunciation of inappropriate behaviour. This mode of writing is used by the author in her novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* (cf. Cahill, 2020: 609) and in *The Shelter* to bitingly comment on the micro-community of writers.

This world, besides being criticised in the 2007 novel, is again represented later, in *The Shelter*, namely in the story "A Literary Lunch". There the same literary world of abundance and fawning around significant and dominant figures is again satirised. The setting is a restaurant in which a group of people (a board responsible for awarding funds to writers) are having an expensive lunch. Among the different clichés of ignorant but pretentious affluence (oysters, truffles, foie gras, French rolls and Bordeaux), some comments are made about women writers — "chic lit for PhDs" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 18) — and "unreadable" literary fiction, "heteroglossial, polyphonic, post-modern examination of post-modern Celtic Tiger Ireland" (*ibidem*: 19), together with a reference to Seamus Heaney, that link both texts (the story and the

novel) in scope: "they indict the production of art as commodity in the Celtic Tiger years, appealing instead for an ethically engaged artistic practice that would challenge the economic and capitalist ethos of post- millennium Ireland" (Cahill, 2020: 612).

In fact, both Anna Sweeney, the protagonist of the novel, and another protagonist of a different story of *The Shelter*, "Illumination", pose the problem in almost the same words: Anna reflects that "the meaning of literature, or of writing […] the meaning of life" does not find its way into literary circles (Ní Dhuibhne, 2007: 75-76); the protagonist of "Illumination", never named, also speculates that "Some answers about writing is what I wanted. What is it for?" And further asks "What is music for? What is writing for? What is life for?" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 43 & 39). Out of that caricature of the literary world, the writer (Anna) tries to find herself and her reason for doing what she does, even if she must fight both its noise and hollowness: she retreats to Annaghmakerrig (vd. *supra*, footnote No. 63, p. 26), and it is in a similar writers' retreat that the protagonist of "Illumination" tries to find a story to tell in the novel she is trying to write: "It must have some more profound and important purpose, surely, even in the context of our imminent extinction, perhaps especially in that context". (*ibidem*) The writer retires from that micro-community of commodified literary world the better to write in the company of those who are really concerned with the purpose of writing and whom she evokes intertextually, other writers from literary history.

The story that the author of *The Shelter* manages to find does not result in a novel, but in a way, it almost ends up working as a sketch of one. The core of the collection is a group of stories that function as what Elke D'hoker calls a short story cycle (cf. *infra* Section 3.4). The story that I will be focusing on is the centre of that cycle called precisely "The Shelter of Neighbours". In that discussion it will become apparent how Éilís Ní Dhuibhne stages her concern with the micro-community of the suburban neighbourhood and how it mirrors the Celtic Tiger macro-community of Ireland. I would say that almost all the different threads characteristic of the author and of her peculiar way of looking at Ireland enmesh centripetally in that story and in the cycle it is the centre of, so much so that we could say that Dunroon Crescent functions metonymically as the Ireland of the economic boom years and the later deflation of the affluence as illusion. All the grand issues of progress and or tradition conflate in knowing whether those who surround us, and to whose community we ineluctably belong and which we help create, represent (can be written as) a shelter or a threat (or both).

In all the different figurations of community discussed above, and in all the thematic focussing and refocussing, either centripetal or centrifugal, the writer and writing (the weaving

and reweaving of stories) is at the centre of the process of making and remaking communities. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne has done that intertextually with folk tales and other texts (e.g., *The Canterbury Tales*), right from her first collection of stories, and more recently also with other writers; she has done that primarily from the point of view of women; and she has done that with a sense of questioning the different Irish communities of which her protagonists are members. These two ways of approaching her work (how communities are questioned, and the role intertextuality plays in telling/writing about that questioning) is how I plan to read four of the stories of *The Shelter of Neighbours*.

Chapter 2 — The continued community of women

2.1 - A woman who gives birth to women

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's originality can be found in the dual fact that she is an Irish feminist writer who thus writes mainly from the point of view of women, even in the rare instances when her protagonist is a man (as in "The Man Who Had No Story" and in "Bill's New Wife"[66]), and primarily about Ireland, even when the main character has emigrated.

The blurring of borders or, put another way, the "hybrid nature of a national identity", as stated by Declan Kiberd in his reading of *The Dancers Dancing* (Kiberd, 2007: 293), already evident in a person with an Irish name and an English pseudonym, who writes mainly, but not only, in English, can also be found in her relationship with Ireland, and is a sign of the complexity of how she relates to her country. Her identity is shaped *vis-a-vis* her understanding of community, which is inflected by a sense of dislocation — "I always felt on a ridge […] in-between different societies" (Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 105) —, as she did not feel comfortable with her family's social class, as we saw above[67]). At the same time, she has an ethical need to assume a responsibility for what she has left behind, a dilemma represented, for example, in "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2003: 83-119). In this story, Detta, the protagonist, returns to Ireland in the early 2000s to meet a son she had given birth to in her late teens (in the 1970s) and had to give for adoption: the context in Ireland did not favour single mothers (cf. *supra*, Section 1.1); she did not want to conform to the expected behaviour of a woman sacrificing her life for the love of a man or for the baby; her education led her to aspire to more than being just a wife-mother. The plot allows the author to cast a look at the Ireland of her youth from the perspective of a character who is simultaneously in and out, given that she is someone who has had to run away and then had to return. The story also problematises the double pull between the guilt for having abandoned her son and the agency of having chosen freedom over the expected behaviour of the sacrificial mother, dominant in Irish discourse. The manifold ambivalence of the character is deepened using the mermaid motif, a symbolic representation of a dual, hybrid identity.

[66] In this story gender roles are looked at critically, as the naturalised representations of the role of man and wife are satirically inverted. The one typically ascribed to women of minding the home, the kids and all the tasks needed to maintain a family, the famous "second shift" which, despite all the advances in the women's liberation movement, "still prevails in Ireland" in the 1990s (Coughlan, 2004: 177), is taken up by Bill.

[67] Cf. *supra* Section 1.2.

Like many Irish women, Ní Dhuibhne, coming of age in 1970s Ireland, had to face "the power of nationhood to edit the realities of womanhood" (Boland *apud* Smyth, 1989: 8). She came to feminism only in the next decade (St Peter & Ní Dhuibhne, 2006: 73), without realising whether writing for or about women was an issue and after starting publishing and becoming known, also unwittingly, as a *woman* writer: "I was a writer before I was a feminist, and before I had any sense of the importance of the feminist movement for Irish literature, and Irish life in general. Until the 1980s I was completely blind to the comparative absence of women's voices in Irish literature". (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 145).

When she started publishing books, at the end on the 1980s and in the early 1990s, she adopted a critical feminist point of view, creating a space, also with her intertextual use of folkloric references, for what Isabel Cardigos describes as the "other, silenced, voices" (Cardigos, 1996: 15), when discussing (albeit without having Ní Dhuibhne in mind) the politics of fairy tales. When I say critical, I mean looking towards Ireland as a *locus* where women were idealized in the image of the Virgin Mary and, in that way, dominated by a patriarchal power that imposed on all Irish women that "one-dimensional metaphor" (Smyth, 1989: 8). That is, women were "written as", "described as" only one thing (and that a symbol, the Virgin, without any reference to reality), independently of the myriad possibilities of self-description open to the complexity of every human being. The mythologising or idealizing of women implied in the Church and state descriptions of women as essentially wives and mothers sought to subsume all possibility of individuality and of any agency. It is from this set of affairs, "the nets of history" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 145), the nationalist-catholic mythology, that Ní Dhuibhne's heroines either want to escape or have escaped. When they return or when they look at theirs or their mothers' or families' pasts (or present) it is, in some way, to come to terms with the life from which they escaped or evolved, giving voice to what was then silenced and thus bringing forth untold history.

I would, therefore, say that the author is a political writer, although not a pamphleteer, and that her look on Ireland is ethnographic and sociological: she is an Irish woman writer whose interests and focus are local, but also transnational. Local because the life experience of her women characters is conditioned by having grown up in Ireland. Transnational since the issues faced by Irish women (stereotypes concerning gender that lead to expected behaviours concerning motherhood, for example) are not exclusive of Ireland.

The author is clearly very aware of Irish nationalism and its effects on Irish society:

> "Irish nationalism […] has produced a terribly rigidly Catholic, censorial, punitive society which evolved after independence and which most people now have enormous problems with. We have a legacy of a rigid, illiberal, punishing society which kept women and children down and was frightened of every sexual impulse and of writing". (Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 115)

Furthermore, she also is conscious of the way the Celtic Tiger later affected Irish identity (vd. Ingman, 2013: 240), in the many losses it entailed for Ireland. The urban-inclined society tended to reject all signs of anything traditional unless it could be commodified as rustic and sold especially (but not only) to foreigners: the Irish language is one example of something lost in the wake of the boom years: "They [the Irish-speaking communities] were regarded [in the heyday of nationalism] as exotic and primitive, but in some way pure and desirable, and that has been turned around to just regarding them as unimportant and almost a nuisance" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2003: 106). Other losses, still according to Ingman, are the family unit, childhood innocence, and originality (Ingman, *ibidem*). Ní Dhuibhne's attention to the actual and local in people's lives arises from her experience as an ethnographer (collecting first folk tales from traditional storytellers or urban myths later) and, as T.S. Eliot purportedly said about Yeats, "it is in particularity […] that the universal is best expressed." (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* St Peter, 2006: 71)

Her views of women's issues gained personal depth when she experienced herself, as a professional woman (as an academic and especially as a writer), the problems women quite often go through that thwart their ambitions: marriage, pregnancy, juggling of career duties and home chores, and motherhood. She for instance tells of an occasion, in *Look! It's a Woman Writer*, of planning to have time to write because she was on maternity leave. However, her husband, Bo Almqvist, fell ill with severe angina, which meant taking care of him when he had heart surgery; "So. No novel." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 140-2). However, in her own words, what clinched it really was that, at around that time, she joined the "Women Studies Forum, set up by Ailbhe Smyth in the mid 1980s", as she stated in her interview with Christine St Peter. (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* St Peter, 2006: 73) Through this experience, her perspective changed, her characters became female and the point of view refocused. (*ibidem*) Being part of a cause, the only one she says she endorses, does not, and did not for Ní Dhuibhne, mean that she lost singularity. Rather, it meant that "there is a refusal to write in terms of an idea" (Smyth, 1989: 12): her writing does not set out from an abstraction but from a concrete experience of lived (or possibly lived) reality, a reality which for most women in Ireland, according to Gerardine Meaney, often becomes very easily part of that "territory claimed by masculine power" (Meaney *apud* Smyth, 1989: 8). Ní Dhuibhne became aware of how easily women's lives can

become overwhelmed by the primacy given to men's exploits especially in a society, like the Irish, with such a strong tradition of patriarchal domination.

The several women characters that she repeatedly pulls out of her creative top hat represent, in different ways, the perspective of Irish women, and it seems as if she populates Irish recent (and sometimes more distant) history with visible women and thereby giving another focus (or opening another door) to that same Irish history. That is, it is as though what she does with her contemporary characters is imbued with concerns of *herstory*, in that the communities where her women protagonists exist gain a female perspective otherwise lost in the flow of history.[68]

2.2 - A feminist folklorist

The remapping, in the sense of casting light on a territory other than the usual male-centered one, or the rewriting of community that Ní Dhuibhne brings about, gains further uniqueness with her creative use of the knowledge she acquired as a folklore researcher, as collector and then full-fledged folklorist.

The use of folk tales, defined by Séan Ó Súilleabháin as that type of "fictional narrative which is traditional in the sense that it is usually handed down orally from one person to another" (Ó Súilleabháin, 1973: 7), marks Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Irishness. This can be found specifically in her use of those types of tales (Irish or international) she herself would have preferred to call "wondertales", from the Irish *scéal iontais* (vd. Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 205), or fairy tales, and particularly (but not only) their main issue, i.e., "the quest for love and marriage" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2002: 1215). Her intertextual use of fairy tales distinguishes her as a writer in the way she juxtaposes them (or motifs from them or from myths, legends, or urban myths) with her realist depictions of contemporary life in Ireland, a writing strategy already referred in this work. Sometimes she conjures up an atmosphere which alludes to folk tales, as when a character enters a forest and immediately feels its dangers (e.g., "Illumination" or "The Blind") or a dark lower ground room which also evokes the possible presence of an evil witch or the

[68] There is here an obvious reference to Emma Donoghue's collection of stories, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002), as Donoghue's feminist project of recovering (or "resurrecting" (vd. https://emmadonoghue.com/books/short-story-collections/the-woman-who-gave-birth-to-rabbits.html, accessed on 5.10.2022) forgotten women from history is similar to Ní Dhuibhne's, although the way both authors do it is strongly dissimilar.

wee people (e.g., "It is a Miracle")[69]. Her stories in which this type of intertextuality occurs have an extra metaphorical depth (as I discussed above[70]) in the sense that the meaning of the contemporary realist stories is extended and enriched. The resulting genre hybridity is another facet of her interest as a short story writer.

Ní Dhuibhne's fictions genre hybridity[71] gains a new dimension with her peculiar use of fairy tales or legends. In the "Foreword" to *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing*, Angela Bourke, presents folklore as having played "a central role in the formation of Irish identity, to be embraced or rejected by individuals and groups, in writing, or simply in living" (Bourke, 2014: 2). Ní Dhuibhne's contemporary characters have incorporated folklore (tradition, the past, rurality), and that heritage surfaces, more or less visibly, as part of who the characters are. However, the contemporary look tinges that heritage: in her writing resonate echoes from the past, but at the same time the tales she uses (or that the characters allude to) are reread by the modern reader with inflections from the present, mostly from a feminist perspective, sometimes foregrounding other suppressed meanings in the traditional tales (e.g., violence towards children).

The Irishness of her writing hangs strongly on her academic endeavours as an internationally recognised folklorist, and it functions slightly differently from what Helena Wulff calls "a source of inspiration that has become a part of her writer profile" (Wulff, 2017: 23), as folk tales are much more than just inspiration for Ní Dhuibhne. She uses folk tales as a deliberate writing strategy aimed at creating a sense of community. By "opening a seam between worlds", as Martina Evans described what Ní Dhuibhne did, for her, with "Midwife to the Fairies" (Evans *apud* Wulff, 2017: 66), and compelling her readers to follow, she opens new paths for her readers to explore. With the juxtaposition of two (sometimes not very) disparate worlds, the author yarns up an intersection between communities from the past and communities of the present and that connection is a new, hybrid sense of community.

As a folklorist and a fiction writer, comparing herself to Roddy Doyle and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, she states "[t]he juxtaposition of motifs, or entire stories, drawn from the pool of

[69] The idea of "a fairy tale atmosphere" is used by Ní Dhuibhne herself when commenting on Roddy Doyle's short story "The Pram" and describing his alluding to forests and evil stepmothers. (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 206)

[70] Cf. *supra* the Introduction and Section 1.4.

[71] Cf. *supra*, Sections 1.2 & 1.3: her choosing an Irish name but writing primarily in English; some of her exiled characters, deeply marked from a life abroad, always returning, even if not always physically, to reread the Ireland from their (or their parents) pasts and contrast it with the present's; the way she positions herself between urban and rural, past and present, a position which allows for dichotomies to intersect and pollinate each other.

traditional folklore with a new literary text written in the mode of realism, is one way in which contemporary Irish literature intersects with tradition" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 211).What Ní Dhuibhne tries to do is more akin to using some wool carded and spun in the old way to embroider a contemporary tapestry[72]: by bringing an old tale (folk tale or legend, Irish or international) into her contemporary yarns, the latter gain depth and resonate differently in her readers' ears:

> I believe that I refer to folktales and legends in my stories because I feel their rich images and symbols enhance and deepen the texture of my stories of contemporary life. I see them as a poetic thread in the tapestry of the thing I am trying to make. The rich coloured light of the folktales illuminates the grey shadows of modern life which I am trying to capture in my writing. (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 215).

Ní Dhuibhne uses fairy tales or legends[73] mainly in two ways. On the one hand, she uses fairy tale tropes to express desire, either in view of getting married and of escaping a family who in some way oppresses or controls the (female) subject, or of getting a lover and, also, escaping a relationship which does not satisfy anymore (or has never done). In both cases, the expression of desire lies in the sexual potency present in either men or women characters: in men there is usually a reference to the darkness of the skin or the hair, to silent types, figurations of the wolf in the mysterious woods or the beast in isolated castles; in women the potency is usually represented with flowers, rivers, lakes, the sea, and mermaids. In both cases, she uses traditional tropes of figuration of female and male desire and desirability. Both types of potency are normally set in contrast with practical, reasonable relationships with men who are very gentle but have no sense of humour; are older; more intellectual than physical; and who do not seem to notice their women. Furthermore, the expression of desire also points to idealised (possible) relationships with figurations of a "prince charming", which prove to be just normal men, sometimes bland, sometimes latently aggressive (vd. the character Thomas in "It is a

[72] Ní Dhuibhne, as do other feminist writers, frequently uses metaphors from embroidery and knitting to refer to writing, possibly as an ironic reference to an occupation stereotypically female. In her collection *Eating Women is Not Recommended* (1991) the story "Needlework" problematises the naturalised proclivity of women to needlework. In "The Flowering" (and elsewhere) the craft of embroidery is compared to that of writing, implying that if a woman could write and were prevented from doing it, she could go mad. (Cf. O'Connor, 2015: 100)

[73] "The two main genres of oral narrative are the folk tale and the legend. The fairy tale or *Märchen* is a sub-genre of the international folk tale: the rule of thumb definition is that a fairy tale is long, multi-episodic, and entirely fantastic or fictional. The legend, by contrast, is short, often involving a single episode, and, crucially, told as a true story. […] The legends, usually embellished with realistic detail which serves to bolster their credibility, are about sightings and encounters with supernatural beings — they deal with the intersection of the real and the supernatural, the ordinary and the extraordinary, whereas the fairy tale dwells predominantly in the realm of the extraordinary […] and is entirely metaphorical." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 207-8)

Miracle"), other times just a sham (vd. the character Denis in "Red-hot Poker"). On the other hand, folk tales are used as a way of criticising, commenting, or exposing more or less hidden well-known realities. This process, I feel, is more community and politically minded in the sense that its main result is to make a social commentary and even, at times, to expose hidden crimes. In her writing, it is common to see the recourse to the subversive character of fairies, because they normally do not conform and often force women to misbehave. Speaking of folk tales, she says "the fairies were viewed as dangerous, to be avoided, and associating with them could have fatal consequences" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* St Peter, 2006: 71). One example, as we shall see further down (cf. *infra* Section 3.1) is the effect of fairies in the protagonist of "The Man Who Had No Story", as they intertextually make him go hither and thither until eventually finding his story. In another of the stories I am going to discuss, "The Blind", one cannot help but wonder if it were not the fairies who pulled the girls to the enclosed garden where the evil priest lurks. At least the possibility of their nefarious action is felt, as shall be seen in Section 3.3.

In both ways she uses folk tales, the motifs can be obvious or simply vague or allusions which count on the audience being able to recognise them (whenever the readers' and the author's libraries, so to speak, coincide) — her Irish audience, for instance, grew up in a context fraught with stories (fairy tales, legends, etc.), but other audiences also grew up listening to bedtime stories or watching Disney rewritings of well-known fairy tales. One example is the feeling of both unease and pleasure that the protagonist of "Illumination" experiences, not only when she enters the woods in her afternoon walks, but also when she meets Ramalina, Marcus and Isabel Klarstad. The references to a mountain lion and other menacing creatures which purportedly lurk in the forest and which the protagonist says she has always feared, create a feeling of unease that at first is realistically justified. However, it is a danger that does not really frighten the protagonist, as long as she does not get lost and sticks to the paths (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 34). Before she meets the Karlstad family, we have a sense of danger impending ("the gate was […] old and clothed with that pale green moss that hangs on the oak trees […] like something that would grow on an ancient coffin, or like the cobweb veil of a skeleton" — *ibidem*). The images created evoke an almost "brother-Grimm-ish" scenario, a setting of a fairy tale: "the forest […] holds in its heart the wild creations of our nightmares". (*ibidem*) When the narrator meets the family, even if its members do not frighten her, it is as if there is something not exactly explainable: Isabel barely utters a word and does not attend school (*ibidem*: 33); the moccasins that the protagonist is offered are her exact size (*ibidem*: 36); the dishes are done

apparently without anyone seeing to them, as is the food, which "seemed to have appeared without agency" (*ibidem*: 37). There is something which neither the character nor the reader can exactly put their finger on, an uncanniness or, in Ní Dhuibhne's words, examples of "intertextual metonymy" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 206) which give a different colour or texture to a mere walk in a wood or a quiet dinner with a secretive family. Among all the richness of intertextual allusion reverberating in the head of a character who is a writer worried about why she writes, the folk tale atmosphere added to the actual telling of the story pulls the reader further into the story (it really "enhances and deepens the *texture*" (*ibidem*: 215) [my emphasis][74]), enhances a sense of communion, of participation in the story, which I think is also part of its aesthetic impact.

The folk tales typically chosen by Ní Dhuibhne to juxtapose or to intersect with her fictional representations of contemporary reality are thus and mostly (but not only) feminine in focus, and they bank very much on the reader's knowledge, however superficial, of those traditional narratives or their motifs (see, below, the discussion of "The Blind"; there the main issue is not feminist).

Evidence gathered by folklore scholars seems to point to the fact that, as opposed to heroic myths (or, in Ireland, the Fenian tales, or epic tales of adventure (Ní Dhuibhne, 2002: 1214), fairy tales are a genre "regarded, from as far back as Plato, as emanating essentially from the domain of women" and are "concerned with the fate of the individuals", as opposed to myths, which, with their epic concerns, focus on the fate of the collective (Cardigos, 1996: 16 & 21). In Ireland, however, although their focus could be both masculine and feminine, fairy tales are a genre that, traditionally, as other types of folk tales (e.g., legends, myths), were "mainly told by men" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2002: 1214). They could also be told by women, but, due to women having more restrictions in terms of access to public spaces, their telling was more limited, both in range and in audience, and tended to centre mostly in the home and be told to children. (*ibidem*)

It is not, therefore, surprising that an author concerned more with the real lives of individual women should favour fairy tales. That is, the use of fairy tales signals the right of women to, from their point of view, tell a story to the public, and becomes a feminist act *par excellence* in Ireland as a foregrounding of the need to counterpoint a woman's individual

[74] In emphasising "texture" and, as in previous pages, foregrounding the metaphor of embroidery and tapestry, I am underscoring the presence of poststructuralist (Barthesian) notions of text as web or as a woven product of the interplay of texts. (Vd. *supra* footnote No. 72, p. 39)

experience to the mythographic collective history of nationalism. Nationalist hegemonic discourses "eras[e] other issues and 'gender becomes subaltern'" (Bebiano, 2011b: 180) to the more preeminent issue of nation building, especially in a postcolonial context, such as the Irish one. In the case of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, who inserts in her stories mostly elements of folk tales[75], it could be understood as a further underscoring of the need to subvert what Isabel Cardigos describes as the "chain of assumptions which derives from the concept of a hierarchical connection between myths and fairy tales or legends, with fairy tales being a vestigial, degraded form of myth" (*ibidem*: 19). By giving agency to women in short stories, women writers like Ní Dhuibhne are bringing the oral tradition as told by women to the forefront of the literary stage; furthermore, by using allusions to folk tales and foregrounding with it female agency, Ní Dhuibhne is disrupting a patriarchal hierarchy and presenting voices which it silenced as alternatives to the collective narrative.

Besides the use of motifs mentioned above, in which traditional folk tale allusions illumine contemporary stories, Ní Dhuibhne also uses complete folk tales ("Midwife to the fairies" and "The Story of the Little White Goat") to counterpoint with her contemporary stories for a contemporary audience. In these examples, the folk tales are interpolated either in the story ("Midwife to the Fairies") or between stories ("The Story of the Little White Goat"). They are not rewritings, *strictu sensu*, as, for example, Angela Carter's pioneer *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) or Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997) are rewritings (or "transfigurations" as Susan Sellers, quoted by Elke D'hoker, calls them (D'hoker, 2016: 183). In these, the folk tales are given a revamping as the characters of the original tales assume different roles than the ones they originally had.

In the case of Carter's stories, the Perrault story "Little Red-Riding Hood", for instance, is retold in three different ways: in one the grandmother is a werewolf ("The Werewolf"); in another the little girl gets in bed with the big bad wolf by choice ("The Company of Wolves"); in yet another, the little girl is a feral child who seduces a Duke ("Wolf-Alice"). As to Emma Donoghue's stories, the traditional characters are given a lesbian reconfiguration. For example, the Beast (from "Beauty and the Beast"), in "The Tale of the Bird", is reconfigured as a woman with a mask, and at the end Beauty decides to stay with her in the castle: "And as the years flowed by, some villagers told travelers of a beast and a beauty who lived in the castle and could be seen walking in the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts"

[75] Vd. *supra*, Section 1.3, the discussion of *The Bray House*, for one use of a heroic folk tale motif, the voyage by sea.

(Donoghue, 1999: 40). Another example taken from Donoghue is the rewriting of "Cinderella" in "The Tale of the Shoe", where the character we identify as Cinderella decides at the end not to marry the prince but to live her life with the character of the godmother instead.

Differently from the examples just given, what Ní Dhuibhne does is to juxtapose folk tale and contemporary story, thereby creating an effect of resonance: the stories comment on one another. Not only are the mysterious world of fairies brought into the contemporary story of a midwife who is called in the middle of the night to help bear a child, but also the practice of infanticide is brought out of the traditional folk tale, allowing the reader to decode it. As the author herself states in the interview to Catriona Maloney and Helen Thompson, "I wrote that first story to illuminate the real meaning of 'Midwife to the Fairies'" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 108). And the real meaning of the tale is the attitude generalised in society of "turning a blind eye, being silent". (*ibidem*)[76]

As to the case of "The Story of the Little White Goat", as the folk tale advances the characters in the contemporary stories grow more and more aware of what they are suffering at the hands of the men they first felt attracted to. This awareness resonates on the folk tale (as the folk tale installments illumined what is at stake in the stories) and causes a tearing in its fabric, so to speak, leading to the modified ending, and thus alerting us "to the patriarchal structures and gendered roles of the original story" (Sellers *apud* D'hoker, 2016: 184). The rewriting is minimal (only the ending is altered), but the mutual resonance and contamination between the contemporary stories and the folk tale pervades the whole collection, *The Inland Ice and Other Stories*. Finally, the accumulated dissatisfaction of the women in the contemporary stories ends up forcing the altered ending: "it's time for me to try a different kind of love. I'm tired of all that fairytale stuff". (Ní Dhuibhne, 1998: 262)

Thus, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's peculiar brand of Irishness is enhanced by the ways in which she uses folklore in her stories. The strongest case can be made for her feminist use of folk tales, in the sense that, in her stories, she foregrounds and reconfigures the roles of women as represented in traditional stories, although other problems of Irish society, both past and present, are also intertextually problematised. Furthermore, by using folk tales from the oral tradition, on a par with Angela Bourke, Emma Donoghue, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, she asserts her position as storyteller in the modern sense, as woman writer and mythographer. She takes effective part in the yarning of community or, put another way, in a remapping of Ireland

[76] This issue is going to be further discussed *infra*, in Section 3.3.

coloured with the threads of folklore. Finally, we could say that her Irishness is also metafictional as it calls our attention to the mechanisms by which the world is coded and to how easy it is to recode it by putting forward a different configuration of gendered roles and attitudes.

2.3 - Looking for shelters — other intertextualities

All the instances of intertextual use of the oral tradition mentioned above lend originality to Ní Dhuibhne's writing. However, throughout her work and specifically in *The Shelter*, the author also evokes productively other texts, in the sense that they "create depth […] [which] leads to other readings and to new levels of meaning" (Bebiano, 2002: 364). That is, when reading Ní Dhuibhne's stories, especially when she alludes to traditional stories, one has the distinct feeling of reading a Barthesian *text* or a Kristevan *genotext*.[77] The author deliberately brings into her texts readings of other texts, thereby inscribing her stories in what Roland Barthes terms "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes *apud* Graham, 2022: 71). This intertextual *jouissance*, or what I above called Ní Dhuibhne's method of using *wool carded in the old way to embroider a contemporary tapestry*, is repeated with "literary" texts and, according to the author herself, it also "enhance[s] and deepen[s] the texture of my stories of contemporary life. I see them as a poetic thread in the tapestry of the thing I am trying to make". (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 215)

Among the authors that are more or less patently alluded to in the stories are James Joyce, Anton Chekov, Henrik Ibsen and Mary Lavin (in "A Literary Lunch"), Oscar Wilde (in "It's a Miracle"). In "Trespasses" we are even privy to the internal soundtrack of the main character, Clara, as the lines of Scott McKenzie's "If you're going to San Francisco" echo in her mind as she goes about her life and crosses paths with the (apparently) flowerless and loveless old couple whose wife she eventually murders. The reader can also find less productive references to other authors: Karen Blixen, Alice Munro, Margaret Drabble, Jean-Paul Sartre, John McGahern, John Donne, William Trevor, Virginia Woolf, Dante Alighieri (and admittedly

[77] Phenotext and genotext are two concepts coined by Julia Kristeva (1941-) to help describe her theory of intertextuality: "The 'phenotext' is that part of the text bound up with the language of communication, the 'thetic-thesis', which displays definable structure and appears to present the voice of a singular, unified subject […]. The 'genotext' is that part of the text which stems from the 'drive energy' emanating from the unconscious and which is recognizable in terms of 'phonematic devices' such as rhythm and intonation, melody, repetition and even kinds of narrative arrangement". (Kristeva *apud* Allen, 2022: 49)

many others which I was unable to detect). They are less productive since they can be mere references to authors or works which do not add meaning to the text. There are further instances when the intertextual play is with the author's own writing, other stories come to mind, as is the case in "The Moon Shines Clear, The Horseman's Here" in which "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams" echoes.

If intertextuality with folk tales brings to the fore the oral tradition and seeks to establish a renewed connectedness between a traditional Irish past and a contemporary Ireland at odds with itself in a globalised commodified world, the intertextual relationships established with the literary tradition (and music) signals a wish of the author to problematise her place (a possible shelter, a putative shadow) and the usefulness of her work in that selfsame web of artistic creations. The two most obvious examples of this wish present in *The Shelter* occur in "A Literary Lunch" and "Illumination". But also in "It is a Miracle", as we shall see in Section 3.2.

In the first case, the characters have a lavish lunch after having decided on who would receive a writer's bursary. They are three men and three women (there is an absent man, Joe), and apparently the board is gender balanced, and the decision would be fair: no considerations of gender would apply in a literarily sophisticated gathering such as that. Nevertheless, the pecking order is parodically established, and it is evident that the men, headed by Alan King, have the final say. The women are characterised, from the point of view of Alan, as either chick lit producers or just a way to comply with the "fad" of having women representation in all kinds of committees. While the men imbibe the best wines available, the women starve themselves on soup of the day and an arid discussion of the latest production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. They are all eating next door to Joyce's aunts' house, from the story "The Dead", and sitting on a table called Last Supper, due to a mural depicting a modern rendition of Da Vinci's work. On the table, Pam, the purportedly chick lit writer, places the phone with which she is going to inform Fancie Briody, a refused applicant for the bursary, that he has not, again, been awarded the possibility to write full-time. Francie, after receiving the call, shoots Alan dead when the latter is leaving the restaurant. The phone signals Anton Chekov's pistol and the *dictum* according to which "if there's a gun on the table in act one, it has to go off in act three" (*ibidem*: 25). All the intertextual allusions in the story point to the final act, the shooting of Alan King, the type of person who, in Celtic Tiger affluent Ireland, supposedly dominates the literary scene, not with criteria of literary merit, but on a whim of power: his sitting in the same place as Christ in the Last Supper; the allusion to "The Dead" in the name of the restaurant, "Gabriel", and in

the privilege given to Alan to carve the turkey (distribute the money) — he will in the end join the many other soon-to-be-dead Irish who do not consider the transitoriness and frailty of the human condition, distracted as they are with wealth and power. Furthermore, there is the use of the bang that Dora, in Ibsen's play, causes in the end when she shuts the door on her husband's tyranny. Finally, the quote at the end, by Francie Briody, of Mary Lavin's "a short story is an arrow in flight towards its target" (*ibidem*) (cf. McKeon, 2012), poses some questions, such as "what is the target?" or "what is the moral of the story?" If men are either tyrannical, violent, or absent, what role is that of women writers who hang on men's words — Fintan O'Toole, the critic, is reverenced (*ibidem*: 17) —: do they make the call or shoot the arrow?

On a final (possible) intertextual note, in "A Literary Luncheon", the first chapter of Agatha Christie's 1972 Poirot novel, *Elephants Can Remember* comes to mind. Can this last Ariadne Oliver and Hercule Poirot story, which deals strongly with the importance of memory and oral testimony to solve a long (almost) forgotten reputed double suicide, have been in the mind of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne while writing the story? The reader cannot *know*, for sure; but it is open to interpretation, another door left ajar.

Another story in which frequent mentions of other writers are evident and productive is "Illumination". In this story the writer, whose name is never mentioned, is in an artists' retreat in America, presumably to write a novel. She is in fact taking stock of her life as a writer and reflecting on her role as such in the context of a tradition that she evokes right at the start by referring to a library and noting the biographies: "Such biographies make me wonder if an ordinary, sane person, lacking any stunning eccentricity, could be a writer at all" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 28). There are two more characters in the retreat, a painter, Li, whose work "suggested fairgrounds, roller coasters, childhood, golden memories broken down in a million fragments" (*ibidem*) and Frederike, a musician, whose compositions "represented alienation and disconnection, the absence of harmony characterising our world. Its randomness." (*ibidem*: 29) The protagonist socialises both with these two representatives of contemporary postmodern artistic creation as with "the old masters" (*ibidem*), and is aware of a double pull:

> I knew I should pay attention to more gritty contemporary writers but once […] I had been transported […] to the idyllic summer woodlands of a Russian dacha, painted by Chekhov's watercolour, and on the next to the cool slopes of the Ngong Hills, embroidered like regal tapestries, fabulous fantasies that sometimes succeeded in shaking the heart, I could not revert to the urban jangle of irony, menace and gruesome murder which is the stock in trade of contemporary fiction. (*ibidem*)

It is as if Ní Dhuibhne herself is announcing what comes next with the Dunroon Crescent cycle of short stories and at the same time indicating that her wish, although she writes about urban dissonance and violence, is to find "Brilliant insights into life and literature. Answers." (*ibidem*: 30) The other possible way for the character to find answers in literature, as I have discussed in the previous section, is folklore, a world where she, the character, goes when, through "intertextual metonymy" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 206), she enters a space that smacks of folk tale, the mysterious woods where she will find the strange family, Romalina, Isabel and Marcus[78]. With the latter she will have discussions about the usefulness of art and literature, although the folk tale feeling remains throughout the story, as for instance is described indirectly, "the wild creations of our nightmares" (*idem*, 2012: 34) and is evoked in the mysterious ways Isabel especially, but also Ramalina behave (*ibidem*: 37). She and the character Marcus discuss the failure of post-modernism and its fractured narrative (*ibidem*: 38) and the exhaustion of the usual contemporary themes of stories, "the conflict between the desire of the individual and the rules of society". (*ibidem*: 38-9) The protagonist comes to the conclusion herself that "one is left to write only what has been written — in a slightly different way — a million times already." (*ibidem*: 39)

Marcus then suggests that instead of staying in the retreat, where she has not yet managed to find her way to writing, she could stay in their house, where "the answer to this problem could be revealed" (*ibidem*), as if the place, comments the protagonist, "were magical" (*ibidem*). There is, she feels, something magical not only in the house but also in the woods, as the protagonist walks back and forth between the retreat, her real room, and the Klarstads', her possible, magical room. Staying would mean, so to speak, an immersion in absolute intertextuality, in genotext, away from phenotext, the real world the character describes as "the fogbound, beloved island" (*ibidem*: 45).

She does not stay, and the reader, as the author does, asks himself, as he tends to do at the end of some short stories: "What is it for?" (*ibidem*: 43). The answer is not easy, but a quote from Alice Munro, who seems to be intertextually implied in "I wander from room to room, in search of the perfect one" (*ibidem*: 44), can, I think, help shed some light on the matter:

> A story is not like a road to follow […] it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows.

[78] Vd. *supra*, Section 2.2.

> And you, the visitor, the reader, are altered as well by being in this enclosed space, whether it is ample and easy or full of crooked turns, or sparsely or opulently furnished. You can go back again and again, and the house, the story, always contains more than you saw the last time. It also has a sturdy sense of itself of being built out of its own necessity, not just to shelter or beguile you. (Munro, 1996: xx)

Stories, in Munroe's sense (which Ní Dhuibhne seems to agree with) do not presume to take us anywhere, or anyway provide us with one solution; they function somewhat like poems do in that they open up ways for us to interpret and reinterpret indefinitely the world and our place(s) in it. The doors are always open.

There are then some reasons, or what can be seen as those, for writing a story: it seems to be inescapable, to have to be written. But there are also reasons to justify a story what it is for: it can be a shelter (you recognise yourself or your pains in it, or, as in the case of "A Literary Lunch", you laugh at it to escape its shadow) or it can be simply something to make you wonder, that is, to bring you as a reader into the story and rewrite it in an endless chain of intertextuality. As we have seen then, intertextuality works as a strategy to deepen meaning but also as a place where the reader, recognising the language (the tradition), be it folkloric or literary (no opposition or hierarchisation implied), can find either a shelter to take or a shadow to expose. It is finally a community creator (a way to yarn community), both centripetally and centrifugally. The thread of Ariadne, embroidered in so fine a way, brings back lost memory: oral or written; and that is a way of facing the labyrinth of the complex and disjointed contemporary world.

Chapter 3 — Opening some doors

Published in 2012, *The Shelter* is the sixth collection of short stories by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, who, up to October 2023, has published eight collections, the most recent being *Little Red and Other Stories* (2020). When *The Shelter* was published, the reception was positive. Sue Leonard, in *The Irish Examiner*, points out how the stories which deal with the fictional suburb of Dunroon Crescent are interconnected, while at the same time speaking of the disconnectedness of the characters involved. She also mentions how critical the author seems to be of the literary world pretentiousness and disconnectedness from the craft of artistic creation: "it's clear that few of the assembled know anything much about writing" (Leonard, 2012: s.p.). Sinéad Gleeson, in *The Irish Times*, also highlights how "The ensemble cast of neighbours are as geographically proximate as they are emotionally distant" (Gleeson, 2012: s.p.), a distance created by the alienation of suburban life. She also recognises the centrality of the writer and of writing in some of the stories of the collection and of how intertextuality, another form of living in one another's shadow or shelter, or of "writ[ing] only what has been written – in a slightly different way – a million times already" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 39), also pervades the collection. Gleeson further points out the use of folklore as the manner through which Ní Dhuibhne represents life as a "mass of threaded chronicles" (Gleeson, 2012: s.p.), another form of intertextual creation, which foregrounds the ethnographic perspective of a writing which draws from many disparate sources and thus creates a *texture* richer in depth of meaning. She also points out the humour and peculiarity of some of the stories' resolutions, which is the focus of interest for another reviewer, Kristina Kopic. The funny tone of the stories (but not exactly always in the ha-ha or comfortable sense) and "the subtle restlessness of her [Ní Dhuibhne's] characters" (Kopic, 2012: s.p.) is what, in this reviewer's assessment, marks the distinctiveness of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's stories in the collection.

It was in fact the peculiar feeling or "aftertaste" of the stories (how they reverberate) which attracted me to the author. The first Ní Dhuibhne story I read was "Midwife to the Fairies", and right then I felt the double pull (from simple realism to uncanny fantastical) which they create in the reader. That may be the cause of their subtle attractiveness: in the almost exact measure that their simplicity or realistic levelheadedness causes identification (e.g., the characters in the story watching *Dallas* or *The Hill Street Blues* on TV), there is the eeriness of that strange folk of the mountains whom, in the context of Irish culture, we associate with the fairies (the wee folk) and their enchanted and dangerous nature. The same feeling of strangeness

assaulted me when I read my next Ní Dhuibhne story, "Fulfillment", and then again with "The Flowering" and with "Blood and Water", and in none of them were there fairies. It was not only the fairies (and other supernatural beings) which caused the eeriness then, but how intensely real the characters are in the complexity and deepness of either what they feel or of the relationships between them, their almost hyperreal nature. In the case of the short stories in *The Shelter*, the effect is the same every time I read them: the characters are so realistic that it is as if I could easily reach out and touch them (meet them and have a pint—with some, at least).

Although published in 2012, many of the stories had already appeared in other publications since 2002, either in short story collections, like the *Phoenix Book of Irish Short Stories* edited by David Marcus, or *Best European Fiction 2011* edited by Aleksandar Hemon[79], or in other publications, such as *Éilís Ní Dhuibhne: Perspectives* edited by Rebecca Pelan.[80] Almost all the stories are set in Celtic Tiger Ireland, in its apogee as well as after its decline, and, as in the case of her 2007 novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, the characters in the stories try to deal with, among other problems, those concerning the tension between a globalised affluent urban society and the more traditional rurality that still persists in Ireland and is central to Irish imaginary. In this socio-economical context, the stories also touch not only upon issues that make Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Irishness (the intertextual use of folktales), but also other issues, which I will try to discuss in more detail: other forms of intertextuality and their relevance to the understanding of the stories and of the characters; metafictional writing and its role in the construction of the stories; the representations both of women in Ireland and of the role of the writer.

As, in a discussion like the one I am writing, it is impossible to address in depth all the fourteen stories of *The Shelter*, I had to narrow my scope and select those I find more representative of the argument I am trying to make. Therefore, bearing in mind the issues I have mentioned above, I selected four short stories. The first is "The Man Who Had No Story" (first published in 2009). In it a folk tale is both juxtaposed and rewritten and lends itself to considerations about the productive use of both intertextuality and of metafictional comments. It can also be read bearing in mind the role of the family as a micro-community in which individuals find either shelter or estrangement, as well as exclusion. The other story I chose is "It is a Miracle" (first published in 2002), a longer story in which many issues are developed:

[79] In my opinion one of the most interesting novelists and short story writers writing today in the United States.

[80] "The Man Who Had No Story" and "The Sugar Loaf" were published there.

representations of women, not only in Ireland, be it contemporarily or in the 1970s, but also from the point of view of a woman outside Ireland looking at her country and at herself. This story raises several questions: exile and identity; intertextuality with folk tale motifs and with canonical literature, both read from a feminist perspective; marriage and adultery and the emotional tensions and ambiguities entailed. The third story I intend to discuss is "The Blind". In it, again, the author makes use of folklore to comment on the present. This story brings to the fore the violence perpetrated on children by members of the Church in the context of institutionalised handicapped children, the furthest possible way a putative shelter could go from its intended goal. The last story I will approach is "The Shelter of Neighbours", which provides the title for the collection, in which representations of community, tradition, neighbourliness, friendship, trust, violence, murder, women as stay-at-home mothers and as working mothers, motherhood and civil servants are all developed in the context of suburban Celtic Tiger and post-boom years Ireland. All those issues are looked at through the lens of a traditional Irish proverb, "people live in one another's shelter", which is, throughout the collection, more or less commented on sub-textually, but in this story is patently problematised in another version both of intertextuality and of rewriting of tradition.

There are other stories in the collection which deal, albeit differently, with mostly the same issues, but these are, I think, quite representative of what apparently underlies this collection. They all provide, as the ones I chose do, what Giovanna Tallone, in her article "'Stories Like the Light of Stars': Folklore and Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne", describes as "an insight into post-Celtic Tiger Ireland with references to the country's recent economic crisis and deterioration in social relationships that characterize the suburban context." (Tallone, 2017: 162)

3.1 - "The Man Who Had No Story" — listen and you will write

This story is a rewriting of a folktale, Irish type 2412B (*ibidem*: 163), and, according to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, it was Bo Almqvist's favourite Irish folktale, as it "illustrates the importance of storytelling in the Irish community" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2018: 153). The folktale can be summarised as follows:

> A man gets lodgings at a house one night. After a meal, he is asked to tell a story or to sing a song. When he replies that he can do neither, he is asked to go outside on some errand, and for several

> hours he has fantastic experiences. When he returns to the house, exhausted, next morning and tells the people there about what he has suffered, they tell him that he will always have that, as a story to tell in the future. (Ó Súilleabháin & Christiansen *apud* Niles, 2006: 143)

In the short story, the folktale is both rewritten in a contemporary realistic setting and inserted in the text, as remembered by the protagonist, Finn O'Keefe, who heard it told in a radio programme. It follows the pattern described by Susan Sellers, "the fusion of 'classic' configurations with contemporary settings and alternative plot lines" (Sellers *apud* D'hoker, 2016: 183). In this case, the character is (or was) a writer who is now a teacher of creative writing. He wishes to use his holidays by the sea in Count Kerry to write something that would be publishable and would give him recognition as a writer and thus social status. In the process, however, he fails to see that his family are estranged and disconnected from him, on the one hand, and that, on the other, what really is the matter with him is that he is suffering from a typically male middle-life crisis: he is tired of his life and of his marriage; he cannot communicate properly with either his wife or his son, and blames them for that exact problem; he is infatuated with a female author who wrote a travel book about Tuscany; he wants to be part of a new, fast paced, globalised and cosmopolitan world (Europe) and seems to be forgetting the local, more traditional and familiar reality he is a part of. He is denied peace and quiet and is forced to return several times to Dublin to solve problems related first to Pangur Bán[81], his son's cat, and later because there are rats in his house gnawing away at appliances. While he is travelling north and south, in the drenched and packed motorways of fast-paced Ireland, he remembers having listened to a radio programme in which the folk tale "The Man Who Had No Story" was told and commented but fails to comprehend that he is in the middle of a similar plot. In fact, he is being thrown hither and thither and, in the process, authoring the story, his story of a middle-aged man in a mid-life crisis who, if he wants to recover his marriage and his son, needs to rewrite his life, which is what he ends up doing.

The first paragraph of the story is narrated in the first person, in Finn's own voice. Nevertheless, when this paragraph ends, the narration is taken up by another voice. It can be read, from that moment on, following Giovanna Tallone's interpretation, as "the voice of an old *seanchai*" (*ibidem*) reading the rewritten folktale. It could also be read as the draft of a story Finn finally came up with after being taken this way and that as the man from the folktale was. He starts it writing about himself, but them realises that to see himself properly he has to put

[81] More about the significance of the name of the cat below.

some distance between himself and himself as narrator, managing in that way to be more critical and truthful. Be that as it may, both possibilities point to the fact that this is a story about writing stories, a metafictional story with other stories inside "[i]n a pattern of Chinese boxes" (*ibidem*: 163-4).

After having arrived in Kerry for the summer holidays, Finn O'Keefe and his wife Gráinne receive a call from their son, Mattie, about their cat, Pangur Bán, who is sick. Finn had hoped for some time of his own to write but has to go back and forth as the matters concerning his home interfere with his plans. In the meantime, he drives through an affluent Ireland gone mad with the mobility frenzy brought about by the development of the road system during the boom years. Indeed, to get away from Dublin down to County Kerry where they are spending their holiday, Finn mentions, first, the M50, a semi-orbital road round Dublin, "the seventh circle of hell" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 1); second, getting lost in the Red Cow roundabout, "essentially a twenty-first-century torture chamber" (*ibidem*: 4-5); and thirdly, the N7, "the fifth circle of hell". (*ibidem*: 5) Ireland is represented as a rat race in a feeding frenzy, with all the demented energy in movement short-circuited by the constantly falling rain. It is in this chaos of violent movement and ungraspable distortion that Finn, similarly to the character in the traditional story, is thrown.

However, the "fairies" that throw Finn hither and thither in his unknowing search for a story are his wife ("But Gráinne worried. So back to town they went" (*ibidem*: 2) and son ("A mouse. Mattie had seen one […] They'd have to go back to Dublin" (*ibidem*: 4). The character is so immersed in himself and his worries — his inability to write as he gets older (*ibidem*: 5); his infatuation with an Italian woman writer, Frances, "laughing, with shining fair hair. Tall and slender […] A gazelle, undoubtedly" (*ibidem*: 4); the tiresome travelling back and forth (*ibidem*); the price of the vet (*ibidem*: 3) or of the pest control man (*ibidem*: 9) —, that he fails to see that he himself, as a husband and as a father, as his wife finally says (*ibidem*: 11), is the real cause of all that is wrong, both in his head and in his family life.

The main issue is then how a man is looking for inspiration for his life away from his responsibilities as a husband and as a father. Finn is a conventional representation of a man going through a middle-age crisis and betraying (even if only platonically) his family vows and obligations (his private sphere) by searching for means of escape of what he perceives as prison and hoping for public recognition. In broader terms, the character could be taken as a representation of Ireland dealing with its globalised status as a cosmopolitan, modern country,

ignoring its connections to the past and to its responsibilities towards it. In either case, there seems to be, in the character, an inability to accept or incorporate the traditional in the modern, the past and the present, and the story does configure an attempt by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne to "creat[e] a continuity between past and present". (Tallone, 2017: 163)

Finn goes through his own hell by the hand of Dermot O' Keefe (the narrator begs us to allow their surnames to coincide: "let's say his name was Dermot O'Keefe" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 6), like Dante[82] accompanied by Virgil. The seventh and the fifth circles are mentioned, so the intertextuality with Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is deliberate. The story opens with a double reference to it: to water, "rain from an Irish sky" (*ibidem*: 1), under which the wrathful and sullen drive, which evokes Canto VII and the visit to the fifth circle. There, those unable to be happy under the sun are punished under water. The seventh circle, where violence is punished, is also alluded to. Later in the story the fifth circle is again referred to, a reinforcement of the wrath followed by sullenness that driving through modern Ireland induces[83]. On another level of intertextuality, the folktale "The Man Who Had No Story" is told as heard by Finn on the radio, and it is commented on, first by the panel on the programme, a professor, possibly a folklorist such as Ní Dhuibhne, and the host, and then by the narrator in the voice of Finn, in free indirect speech. This leads me to conclude, together with the "false start" of the first-person narration in the first paragraph, that the person actually telling the story is Finn, who ends up realising that this is the "trigger" he was missing at the start of the story, that stories are born of other stories. The problem Finn is facing is a question of lack of imagination, and he does not see that he is already creating a story, in his mind, based on another, in a process described by Ní Dhuibhne herself: "Where did those images come from? They all come from somewhere, and I'm always aware as an addicted reader that I have read enormous quantities of material that I have no conscious memory of, but all that stuff is somewhere inside. I'm not quite sure sure of when it's going to start popping out" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 110):

[82] Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), creator of *The Divine Comedy* which is considered the pre-eminent work in Italian literature.

[83] In her novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* (2007), road rage and road murder supply a story line with strong implications for two of the protagonists, Leo and Kate: Leo, who tries to run an association designed to promote legislation that could both control and protect drivers, and Kate, his wife, who ends up dying in a car accident. It underscores a concern with the fast-paced development brought about in Ireland by the Celtic Tiger and how that accelerated movement, that new roads symbolise, impacts nature and tradition symbolised by dead foxes. About foxes as symbols of tradition, as well as death, see *infra*.

> Trouble is, he can't give himself a trigger. Well, that's not true, of course he can — he knows hundreds, literally, enough to get him through a ten-year course with the same class, although no course actually lasts longer than ten weeks. But none of those triggers fires anything, shoots anything — whatever triggers do. None of them hits the target. Because his imagination is dead. Dead as a fox on the motorway (he's passed three of them, flattened like eggs in the pan, poor buggers). He used to have loads of imagination. It was his hallmark. But it's gone, like the colour in his hair, and the other things he had when he was younger. Such as? *Joie de vivre*. Passion. Bright dreams. (*ibidem*: 6)

Right after this admission of his inability to find a trigger, the story is remembered and commented on, with Finn ending up by committing the fault of dismissing the fairies: "he doesn't believe in the fairies". (*ibidem*: 9) Not coincidently, the Pardoner from Chaucer's tale "The Pardoner's Tale" is mentioned when Finn describes the pest control man. The Pardoner is responsible for selling indulgences which allow the sinner to enter heaven expunged from sin. In the case of Finn, who wants to escape Dublin to write his *Bella Kerry* book, that is, to escape his middle-age crisis and live a life of ease in Tuscany, a purported paradise lost — the stereotypical sunny always-happy-south, where birds escape to in order to avoid the winter months, as viewed from the eyes of a Northerner —, with his Beatrice, slender Frances of the "long rabbit feet". Contrarily to his vaguely erotic wishes, the "Pardoner" causes him to stay in Dublin and face his silent son, even if Mattie does not react. That humbling experience of kneeling at home killing rats, at the end of two weeks of going north and south, finally makes Finn understand that his lofty dreams of emulating the other intertextual reference, the "quirky Irish monk who wrote about his cat in Old Irish high on the mountain" (*ibidem*: 2-3), is not what is required of him (or, indeed, allowed). That is because if he is to keep his wife and recover his son he has to make "a supreme effort" (*ibidem*: 13). He is not an isolated monk extracting meaning from pages, in his idyll of "Books, silence, thought, my alcove" (*anon.* in Heaney (transl.), 2006: n.p.)[84], while his cat catches mice. He is a husband and a father who has to care for his son and wife's wishes, while at the same time, if he manages to extract *that* meaning from what he perceives as mere distractions, finding the inspiration for a story. In her intertextual rewriting of "Pangur Bán", Ní Dhuibhne casts Finn as simultaneously trapping rats and inadvertently on the verge, if he could only see it ("Focus [his] less piercing gaze"), of finding his story and "solv[e] the cruxes, mak[e] a mark" (*ibidem*).

[84] I use Seamus Heaney's translation in https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/48267/pangur-ban, accessed on 7.1.2023.

Upon returning to Kerry, after controlling the rats, symbolically eliminating the plague that is gnawing away at his home, he has a row with his wife and concludes that, however attractive "[s]ome peace and happiness" would be, "he missed Gráinne when he was in Dublin catching the rats". (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 12) The idyllic situation of him writing in his ivory tower, while his wife and son are always there when he deigns come down to earth, such as the monk and Pangur Bán had, does not "free the meaning pent" (Heaney, *idem*). Also, he realises that going to books to find escape does not do the trick either:

> Frances and her second husband in Bella Tuscany never seem to have a row. They have candlelit dinner, long walks, holidays. Outings with friends. He wonders what it was like with her first husband. How could a marriage to someone as lovely and charming and pleasant as Frances come to an end? (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 12).

The inspiration that can make a good book (a good story) is (again) suggested by folk wisdom: "*Is fearr an troid ná an t-uaigneas*, he heard on the radio another day. The fighting is better than the loneliness" (*ibidem*). Either with his wife or with his son, he needs to fight to deserve their unconditional love (Agape): he realises he needs to confront his son ("Mattie's wrong. A balance is as good as it gets.)" (*ibidem*) and kiss his wife, even if he is afraid of her.

In either case, after a vision of flowers by the road illumined by a July sun-ray, and of realising that he cannot wait for his mother to come and rescue him (*ibidem*: 13-14), he manages to read a road sign of a deer not as danger road sign but as a symbol of hope for finally having understood that reality, the reality that he has lived through, holds the key for his managing to get "the gift of music, or story, or song" (*ibidem*: 9) from the fairies and writing "a short story that he knows in his heart is a good short story, no matter what anyone else thinks" (*ibidem*: 5). His "fairies", his wife and son, demand that he shares their troubles in order to gain their love.

After all his troubles, like his namesake Dermot O'Keefe's (the protagonist of the folk tale), he comes up with a story to tell. While before he has said "He hasn't the foggiest idea, although he is a teacher of creative writing" (*ibidem*: 5), because for him being married has come to mean stagnation and entrapment, now, after understanding that his fixation in a make-believe world of escape (the book *Bella Tuscany*) has clouded his ability to see those around him and disconnected him from them, he can finally extract poetry (create) from whatever triggers surround him: "the yellow sign with a picture of a deer on it" becomes a "deer rampant. Young and lovely. Full of energy and full of joy" (*ibidem*: 14). The fox, "associated with the supernatural" (Pelan, 2009: 18) and death, flattened by the side of the road, which Finn associated with his dead imagination (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 6), in a way transmogrifies into the

deer that, also "flattened by the side of the road" as a road sign, gains life symbolically in the end. Finn is symbolically the fox (a carnivore that kills rats) while his son is the herbivore deer that symbolically evades flatness (death) and gains life, "full of energy and full of joy" (*ibidem*: 14).

Deploying again what Giovanna Tallone characterises as "her usual mode of interlacing a traditional story with a modern one through the pattern of a story-within-a-story" (Tallone, 2017: 164), Éilís Ní Dhuibhne brings about a perfect introduction for her collection of short stories. This story is about writing, about finding stories to tell (ethnography of a sort) in what surrounds the writer and to write. It can be the people around you, ordinary people, your neighbours, in whom you can either find shelter or whose shadow you can (must) evade; it can be tradition (folklore), which in Celtic Tiger Ireland, trapped in the rat maze of making and spending money — hence my association of Ireland and Finn (cf. *supra*), who is also trapped in his own maze —, was seen as quaint, usually dismissible or, at most, touristically usable. For Ní Dhuibhne, on the contrary, folklore is a strategy of literary creation, as she stated in an interview: "I use folklore motifs and stories. I think it does add to the contemporary text. It colours the texture and it makes it richer. Sometimes I am not quite sure exactly how that is working but I know that is the case" (Mutran & Aquino, 2016: 152). Furthermore, according to Elke D'hoker, the story does also counterpoint traditional life and suburban life, as Finn, "[i]nstead of fairies, […], has to contend with rats, that typically urban blight, and instead of having an eminent position in the community, […] is criticized by his wife for his 'selfish' absorption in his 'stupid writing'" (D'hoker, 2016: 134). I would nevertheless argue with D'hoker that it is precisely the fairies who are at work on Finn: his wife, his son, rats, the cat — those are the mute entities that blow him hither and thither.

Besides the folktale "The Man Who Had No Story", which "seems to be specific to Ireland and Scotland" (Niles, 2006: 142), Ní Dhuibhne uses intertextually the Western canon (Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale") and other sources (the poem "Pangur Bán"). It could also be said, bearing in mind the academic prowess of Ní Dhuibhne, that she had "Cædmon's tale" in mind as well, a rewriting in Latin of "The Man Who Had No Story" by the Venerable Bede, since repeated mention to *The Divine Comedy* is made, and Bede is the only Englishman admitted into Dante's Paradiso.[85] "Cædmon's tale" is a rewriting of the same folk tale with a similar end result or moral: Cædmon also regains access through

[85] "Paradiso", X, 126-129: "[…] Lo! further on, / Where flames the arduous Spirit of Isidore, / Of Bede, and Richard, more than man, erewhile, / In deep discernment. […]" (Dante, 2023: s.p.).

recognition into a community (the abbey) (Niles, 2006: 144). The dissemination process, or productive intertextuality, that brings the past to bear on the present, disrupting both, results in what Ní Dhuibhne herself describes as "an aspect of the imagination and the imagination is the world's greatest thief. It takes images from all over the place and rearranges them in another way" (Ní Dhuibhne a*pud* Moloney & Thomson, 2003: 110). It takes them from the air as a writer breathes in and gets pollinated or feels the echoes in her echoing chamber as other stories resonate in her memory.

Finn O'Keefe was in the process of "stealing" from *Bella Tuscany* to create a *Bella Kerry*, intending to make money with tourism and thus take part in the rat race of the Celtic Tiger. What he ends up doing through the hand of his invisible godmother, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, is holding up a mirror in which he sees himself as we see the possibilities of a creative Ireland that can be re-written and re-read but without letting the past, the tradition, the community outside that progression into the future: "Ultimately, these visions and revisions of both past and present, 'tradition' and 'modernity', disruption and continuity would open up the possibility of their coexistence in a society that, though immersed in the global (which is not the same thing as globalised) would care for, and engage with, the local" (Pérez, 2010: 45).

Stories, this story seems to be telling us, are all around us if we care to see or listen to them: we can hear them on the radio; perceive them in the dead eyes of a son or the sharp tongue of a wife or in a sick cat; read them in our inability to write them. If we can stop ourselves from following in the roaring blind rat race of the times, we can perhaps listen to them reverberate in the empty spaces, dead foxes, road signs that evoke inexistent animals, cold homes, uncomprehending radio hosts — in simple but meaningful things. As Yeats[86], we can hear Innisfree wavelets in a fountain in grey bustling London.

3.2 - "It is a Miracle" — A mermaid in the forest

This short story represents a good example of what Rebecca Graham describes as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's "radically feminist undertaking", specifically "her repurposing of folklore" (Graham, 2017: 63), although more subtly or discreetly so than another one of her short stories, "The Mermaid Legend". It also illustrates Jacqueline Fulmer's concept of indirection, which

[86] W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), Irish poet, dramatist, and politician, wrote, among other well-known poems, "The Lake Isle of Innesfree" about a childhood favoured place remembered in the cold and grey London of 1888.

she develops in *Folk women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston and Lavin* (2007). According to her, in a later essay (Fulmer, 2009: 222), "the term refers to when writers or orators wish to delay their audience's comprehension of their position on a subject, which may contradict that of the audience". As Fulmer states it in her former work, the "mermaid, like the selkie or seal maiden, often appears in folklore doing things human women would be barred from by nature or social stricture, like roaming large expanses of water unattached to any family, partner, or institution, or seducing and claiming men at will" (Fulmer, 2007: 96). Mermaids are thus symbols or motifs that point metaphorically to the reconfiguration of female sexuality, from mere objects to agents of sexual desire, charged with powerful and sometimes uncontrollable sexual needs that require satisfaction. This is information that is best conveyed indirectly, as audiences may not accept a direct representation of the issue.

Sara, the protagonist of "It is a Miracle", is an Irish emigrant in a Scandinavian country never named, but possibly Sweden or Finland, the countries with the most lakes in Europe: "[…] this country is full of lakes. You can't get away from them. Everywhere you go there is a lake, glittering like a knowing eye at you from among the rocks and the dark trees". (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 71) She works in a library, and lives with a writer of crime novels, Thomas, who writes "mostly about murdered women" (*ibidem*: 93). The comfortable life she attained is not satisfying, but bland, lacking in passion or adventure. The miracle the title points to seems to be that for her there might still be time to turn her life around or to enrich it with passion with the man, Ernesto, whom she serendipitously meets in a restaurant in Vienna. She is in Austria attending a conference of librarians whom she avoids and ridicules for their stereotypical behaviour.

The story opens with Sara and Thomas together in the last weekend of the summer holidays, the day before schools reopen, and Sara regretting not having either children or friends to celebrate the season with. Sara is restless from the boredom entailed in keeping up appearances and behaving "just like everyone else" (*ibidem*: 70). There are hints, also, of an inner conflict in her related to unfulfilled sexual desire, and they come in two ways: firstly, in how Sara sees the landscape as edible, "a dark chocolate filled with sweet cream [which] [s]he'd love to grasp […] or somehow hold onto" (*ibidem*: 68), as references to chocolate are sometimes used in the author's stories to imply sexual attraction in men or the male sexual organ[87]; secondly, as an allusion to the mermaid motif and swimming as symbol of unfulfilled sexuality,

[87] For example, in "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams", how the character Detta describes Karl Brown (vd. Ní Dhuibhne, 2007b: 83-4) and *infra* in the discussion of "The Blind", Section 3.3.

"Her movements are lazy as the evening, and the water laps against her skin. A small fish jumps, plopping close to her with a quick, quiet flip, a surprisingly comforting sound. She feels a kinship with the fish; she feels a kinship with the water itself" (*ibidem*). Sarah O'Connor, in her essay "Female Maturation in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *Cailíní Beaga Ghleann na mBláth*" (2009) states that Ní Dhuibhne is fully aware of the powerful symbolic nature, in traditional stories, of swimming (O'Connor, 2009:121) (in burns, in lakes, in the sea). In that novel (as in my opinion it does in this story) it represents female sexual desire. Like swimming in the sea there, swimming in the lake here "represents an untamed, uncontrollable force" (*ibidem*: 122). When she swims Sara feels an affinity with the water that she cannot quite explain, but which leaves her secretly satisfied, as if she is in her element. Her feelings are ambivalent and that is represented by the reference to the chocolate and the allusion to a folk tale motif, the mermaid one: "the archaic emerges […] as a result of some psychic ambivalence" (Moloney, 2009: 105).

There is something in Sara that transcends her material existence with its socially accepted assumptions about women's sexuality, a deeper level in herself than the one patent in how her life with Thomas is, and that level of inner life, not entirely clear to the reader at this moment in the story, is given a depth which is also not accessible to Thomas. In the superficial, predictable day-to-day existence, they do not even share a bed, rather, "they tumble happily into their separate beds" (*ibidem*: 70). Yet Sara, whose happiness, as we are given to understand on the same page, is merely wine-induced, needs more if she is to escape her life as a story already told, the story of accepting that everything will be OK which is represented by the counterpoint of Thomas's T-shirt's pop-wisdom slogan and the destiny of those she sees around her as "[p]eaceful and harmonious, warm and luminous, it is heaven on earth" (*ibidem*: 72). Although on the surface she appreciates her life with Thomas, they do not really connect, which is a conventional representation of how long-term marriages function; being together is like being alone: "she feels she would just as soon be reading or watching television […] she knows he feels exactly the same." (*ibidem*: 69) Their relationship is not that of a man and a woman, but of siblings – "people sometimes ask if they are brother and sister" (*ibidem*: 70) – which precludes the possibility of sex, in line with the incest tabu in Western culture.

As the story develops, we come to realise that Sara is in two minds about pursuing a relationship with Ernesto, the Italian man she met in the restaurant in Vienna when she was "roaming large expanses of water unattached to any family, partner, or institution, or seducing and claiming men at will" (Fulmer, *ibidem*). The conflict in Sara's mind is having to choose between a stable and predictable life which she at some point even perceived as "very romantic"

(*ibidem*: 71), shelter without real connection (shadow, really), and a possibly passionate, sunny and unpredictable relationship with a man from the south she hardly knows, a real connection with no guaranteed shelter. The character seems to represent the very human desire of wishing to attain the best of two worlds. The use of the mermaid allusion reinforces this ambivalence in Sara, her being between two "worlds": mermaid legends, according to Ní Dhuibhne's former husband, Bo Almqvist, "are loaded with strong emotions: homesickness, love, conflicts between double loyalties" (Almqvist *apud* Graham, 2017: 64). Also present is the double pull between the predictable stable north of Thomas and the rash blistering south of Ernesto, two stereotypes with a long tradition in Western literature (in stereo, which lends a special depth to the music the story is creating in the reader's mind).

The protagonist looks at the example of another woman, Lisa, who like her lived a life not entirely satisfactory but practically organised: although not enjoying it, she performed her conventional duties as a mother: "she admits to being an unpaid chauffeur, an unpaid cook, an unpaid washerwoman and unpaid charwoman" (*ibidem*: 73). Motherhood is represented explicitly as hard work, and not affection. The question of the apparent contradiction between grumbling about it from the perspective of someone who is "feminist and liberated and assertive" (*ibidem*), and nonetheless performing the tasks of a stay-at-home mother and accepting to receive the ex-husband to eat at most meals, does not bother the practical Lisa. However, she leaves all that suddenly for a passionate relationship, a representation of a prince charming from a fairy tale come true: "rich […] [with] a big apartment […] [and] a summer place by the sea" (*ibidem*: 77).

Sara is reluctant to believe that such a lucky (miraculous) occurrence could happen. The reason for her suspicions is in some way clarified by her telling a story she remembers of the suicide of a woman who was delusional about having married someone, but who apparently was just depressed. As Sara remembers it, the story happened in London (*ibidem*: 76) but seems to refer to how in the recent past Irish women whose families had some means could emigrate to England or go there either to have abortions or to live as single mothers, escaping the stigmatization they would suffer should they have stayed in Ireland (the fact that the woman is Bridget and the man Paddy, clichéd names, is not accidental). This piece of remembered history, of the sufferings of a woman, could foreground the ingrained fear Sara feels in her Irish self as well as distrust towards both the giddiness of love and men[88], as just before and immediately

[88] Cf. the issues involved in the collection *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* discussed *supra*, in Section 1.3, p. 22 and *passim*.

after the story she mentions drinking being involved both in the case of the woman who committed suicide and in the case of Lisa. The allusion is just that, a tenuous allusion, since, throughout the story, the reader is only very dimly aware of Sara being Irish, inasmuch that she never explicitly refers to her origins, besides mentioning that "her own family […] did not celebrate this feast" (*ibidem*: 71) and being aware that Bridget and Paddy are Irish names (*ibidem*: 76). Only to the end, when Ernesto's emotion seems to seep into her, does she mention her mother and Dunroon crescent, the Dublin suburb where she grew up (*ibidem*: 85) and which is at the core of the group of stories this one, although tenuously, also belongs to.

The reader only fully understands what really is in Sara's mind since the beginning of the story when the narrator finally (*ibidem*: 78) tells the story of Sara having met Ernesto when she travelled to Austria for a conference. Although the meeting is fortuitous, it happened because of the character's curiosity regarding local food. The restaurant she chooses is a dark, smoky place, almost another world, something not what it seems, it "looked more like a pub than a restaurant, but it was crammed with people eating" (*ibidem*: 80). It is thus an ambivalent place. After she enters, she is placed with a man that "looked like the food she was looking for" (*ibidem*). There is here an association with an earlier moment in the story when she eats the Turkish crayfish (*ibidem*: 69), which brings together to this moment two story threads: her swim and what it symbolises of female potency (cf. O'Connor, 2009: 121), on the one hand, and, on the other, the man, the Turkish prince charming, that "rescued" Lisa from her life represented as enslaved to her children and ex-husband. Both threads are instances of subtle metonymical intertextual use of folk tale motifs, but here, perhaps propitiated by the dark which was strongly emphasised by the vocabulary choice (or what Greimas would call an isotopy: "dark, cluttered room"; "curtains shut out daylight"; "place looked smoky"; "heavy green cloth"; "walls panelled with dark wood") (*ibidem*, 79-80), the intertextuality becomes patent: his "shirt was snow white"; he "was like a woodcutter in a fairytale; he reminded her of Red Riding Hood's father"; she, the woman who looks hungrily at food, including the man, represents the witch, the feared, unusual woman.

Although she is listening and reacting to his apparent seductive advances, with his questions and his story, there is a parallel story in which Sara is cast as the silent seducer leading him. This coexistence of text and subtext foregrounds an inversion of the conventional roles ascribed to men and women. There seems to me to be a parallel between that feeling and her silent comments about the food they are eating: his is an undifferentiated mush (the usual conventions) whereas hers is a very clear allusion to a male sexual organ. When she reflects

that "she knows what Italian men can be like when they come across a single woman" (*ibidem*: 81), at least how she stereotypically sees men from the south; also when she herself thinks about him as the woodcutter in Little Red Riding Hood, implying that his masculinity is active and aggressive (which is an assertion of the reader's expectations in that the allusion aligns with expected, naturalised or conventional readings of men's masculinity); and finally when, after being told that he had been unfaithful to his wife and been kicked out — Sara concludes that "he was here trying to get over it, flirting with strangers whom he encountered" (*ibidem*: 83). However, by all appearances he is being sincere, which is contrary to conventional expectations of men seducing women, while she is purposefully lying and wolfing down a symbol of manhood, the sausage and the cabbage, to supplement her lack of iron (presumably because she is menstruating): "[h]er body was screaming for iron" (*ibidem*: 82). She is also taking over Thomas's identity of crime novelist, and thus rewriting herself as an agent of her destiny and escaping being symbolically murdered, either by Thomas, a writer who murders women in his bland books, and his predictable piece of "heaven on earth" (cf. *supra*, p. 59), or by a woodcutter who could instead be cast as a wolf but is not, since the one who is lurking in the shadows is Sara and her intentions. The inversion is underscored when Ernesto manifests his vulnerability: "[t]he woodcutter started to cry" and Sara sees him not as a threat "not as thick as it looked from her side of the table" (*ibidem*: 85).

The symbolic inversion of the folktale motifs reinforces the feminist perspective, the ascribing of subjective agency to a woman, and Ní Dhuibhne is here quite consciously doing that. The usual folktale plot structure is as follows:

> The classic form of the fairytale might be described as a narrative of the adventures of young people who start in an undesirable position, leave their own space (either because they are forced to or of their own volition), and are tested by strangers (animal, human or supernatural). They acquire the magic resources or helpers that endow them with the power to overcome dangers or carry out impossible tasks, a capacity for achievement which accords them status. As a result, they achieve a recognition which allows them to [confirm] the strength of their relationship with a desirable partner. (Cardigos, 1996: 13)

The plot, *mutatis mutandis*, is developed with feminist twists in the resolution phase: Sara is abroad, and although "forced" to be in a conference which she finds uninteresting (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 78), is, of her own volition, out of the well-trodden touristy / foody path (cf. *ibidem*: 79), in a place where local authentic food is served. She imagines she is being tested by a stranger, but it is she who ends up testing him. Then she magically steals his power from

him (eats his manhood symbolically, the sausage) thus overcoming the danger of being eaten herself (by the conventional wolf) and acquiring primordial status over the usual patriarchal representative. The result is that Sara, at the close of the meal, gains the strength to decide herself whether she assumes a duplicitous nature and betrays Thomas, more to the end of the story or whether she will pursue a relationship with the Italian Ernesto and eventually marry him, like her friend Lisa did with the Turkish prince charming Tacumsin, a marriage "as valid as boiled potatoes"[89].

The inversion of the conventional plot, strengthened by the very Irish mermaid and water symbolism of female sexual potency, is therefore materialized in Sara. This character represents a reconfiguration of conventional representations of women in that it is she who recovers from the man the power to be duplicitous: either to betray a spouse or to seduce a stranger abroad. The duplicitousness of the character is further reinforced by the obvious reference to Oscar Wilde's[90] play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, either in the name of the character Ernesto, whose earnestness reflects inversely on her insincerity, and makes her in the end feel bad (cf. *infra*), or in Sara's difficulty in living in the stifling and predictable environment of Thomas's world, "the pinnacle of civilisation" (*ibidem*: 72). She is not happy with keeping up appearances, the earnestness which is criticised in Wilde's play, and she plays with the idea, not fully resolved in the end, of a duplicitous relationship like Algernon's with his imaginary friend Bunbury (hence the term Bunburyism, coined by Wilde), to escape the stifling social situation in which she cannot find a way to express her identity as a sexually potent woman.

This wish of youthful sexual freedom is further foregrounded by the recurrent evocation of ABBA's[91] song, "Dancing Queen", and it also problematises Sara's teenage years and raises two questions in the mind of the reader: why did Sara go to London and find a job as teacher

[89] This, I feel (as no such proverb exists), is a delicious self-reference and both a wink and a tribute to Bo Almqvist. In her memoire *Twelve Thousand Days — A Memoire of Love and Loss* (2018), Ní Dhuibhne recalls the expressions her husband used to make up and use in the form of proverbs that he would deploy together with real ones: "Bo had a wide range of colourful expressions in the form of proverbs and quotations. […] Most of the expressions were traditional, but they were augmented by adages and metaphors of his own invention. He had his favourites: 'Much squealing and little wool, as the woman said when she killed the pig.' 'Every little helps, as the wren said when she pissed in the sea.' […] These sayings were part of his personality; they constituted an element of his voice." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2018: 3). It is particularly interesting as an autobiographical note, since the character Sara is "as good as" married to a Swede whom she is thinking of betraying. Could it be Ní Dhuibhne's way of reassuring Bo that this was just a story?

[90] Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) Irish poet and playwright known especially by *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891), and infamously for being convicted for "homosexual acts".

[91] Swedish pop-music super group formed in 1972 by Agnetha Fältskog, Björn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson, and Anni-Frid Lyngstad.

(cf. *ibidem*: 76), and why does she refer to her father as the real wolf (cf. *ibidem*: 84), whom she is glad is dead? Only very late in the story do we start to have hints as to Sara's origins. This belatedness could mean that she is forcefully silent about her past, which points to a possibly painful past: either violence at home or an unwanted pregnancy. In any case, the recurrence of the song throughout the story points to a wish to regain the lost freedom. First she experiences the fun the song implies as echoes from afar of other people having fun (*ibidem*: 69, 89). Only when she is "riding the loop", when she is having dizzying fun herself (*ibidem*: 90), does she assimilate for herself the joy of the song. Even though the reason why her youth was lost is partially silenced: the possibility to have fun with different partners whenever she wishes to.

In that last instance, she is in a fairground with her friend Lisa: the feeling of freedom and happiness is mixed with an opposite feeling of danger and of being trapped and not in control, as she decides to risk a both adventurous and dangerous run in the roller coaster. The tension of having to do something against her will releases a memory of being attacked by a German shepherd dog and foregrounds another thread which has appeared here and there in the story, the references to the holocaust (*ibidem*: 78, 89, 91, 92 and 93). Sara's reluctance to visit Mauthausen as a tourist destination, as her reluctance to eat Italian or Greek and construed as just crankiness on her part, is later explained by her reaction of physical ill-being at Ernesto's story of his family not surviving the concentration camp in Linz: possibly her Lithuanian family were also exterminated and it is something which she finds too painful to express. Ernesto's family history seems to almost parallel hers: they, his family, were saved by an Irish priest in Italy, as her refugee family were also able to survive in Ireland by converting to the Church of Ireland although she underscores that she is an atheist (*ibidem*: 92). Perhaps on account of that coincidence, after being turned upside-down in the roller coaster, she decides to send Ernesto an email and start the process of escaping Thomas, another of the characters interested in the commodification of suffering denounced by Sara (*ibidem*: 92-93).

The miracle in the title could then in fact be that, as Ernesto says, their serendipitous meeting was a one in "one million, two millions […] lots" chance (*ibidem*: 85). Or it could be the occasion of the roller coaster stopping in mid-loop and leading Sara to consider that she is not yet so old as not to be able to remake her life as a dancing queen, maybe with Thomas (and Ernesto on the side for good measure!), or maybe with only Ernesto who has proven earnest, contrary to what she conventionally expected of a man like him. I think the miracle (the moral of the story) could be read as follows: beyond a simple inversion of folk tales, which function

more as resonating chambers to deepen the reader's understanding of what is going on, there is another deeper level, historical in the cultural sense and not in the often criticised touristy one (cf. *ibidem*: 79 and 92-93), i. e., the miracle is that a relationship of mutually sheltering individuals with a common heritage that runs deep in them is possible, beyond the mere local and circumstantial.

This, metafictionally, is a story worth telling. Sara says she has thought of writing a novel: "Why should she? There are enough books in the world — thousands, that nobody reads, in the library where she works". (*ibidem*: 79) Ní Dhuibhne here uses a self-reference to another story in the collection, "Illumination". There another woman asks herself the same question while she seeks "brilliant insights into life" (*ibidem*: 30): "what is writing for" if "one is left to write only what has been written — in a slightly different way — a million times already" (*ibidem*: 39). It is "embroidery […] of a very complicated kind" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2007: 92), thinks another exiled Irish woman, Detta from "Hotel of Murdered Dreams", this writing of stories, a "quintessentially Irish occupation" (Graham, 2017: 69) whose result resonates across the lake surfaces of stories "like silver canoes of joy" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 69).

The miracle for me, finally, is that originality sought by Laurence Sterne[92] in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*: "one single miracle" instead of always "twisting and untwisting the same rope" (Sterne, 2010: 361): for Sara this means managing an original life and for Ní Dhuibhne it translates into not merely "pouring only out of one vessel into another", but rather it equals yarning an original, resonant tale and with it a micro-community of mutual respect.

3.3 - "The Blind" — Hide that I may see better

The Ireland described in tourist brochures and promotional websites, as the one from which the quote below was extracted, is full of mystery, legend, myth, and all kinds of beautiful stories populated with fairies and leprechauns.

> It was believed that Faeries used bluebells to trap passersby, particularly small children. Bluebells were said to ring when Faeries were summoning their kin to a gathering; but if a human had heard

[92] Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) was an Irish novelist who may be quoted as an example of a writer whose fragmentary style punctuated by repeated metafictional asides and a strong genre hybridity renders the concept of literary postmodernism inoperative as a category.

> the sound, or seen them, it would be their death knell (a sound or sign announcing someone's death!) Not surprisingly, it was considered unlucky to trample on a bed of bluebells, because you would anger the fairies resting there. There's an interesting belief that wearing a garland of bluebells will induce you to speak only the truth. Or that if you could turn one of the flowers inside out without tearing it, you would eventually win the one you love. (Hamilton, n.d.: n.p.)

However, as the excerpt above also mentions, fairies are not the gentle creatures popularised by the 20th century by the Disney industry. In the traditional tales[93] they can portend ominous events or lead the innocent astray — in fact, beneath all its undeniable emerald green and otherwise colourful beauty, the Irish landscape hides hideous crimes which people sometimes prefer not to see or, to employ a very typically Ní Dhuibhnean expression, to turn a blind eye to, that is, participate in the communal practice of "silence and collusion". (Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 102) The story "Midwife to the Fairies" discussed above deals precisely with that practice.[94]

"The Blind" also approaches the subject of child suffering, in this case of victims of paedophilia, and in a different way also indirectly alludes to a news story: the case of the Catholic priest Brendan Smyth, first brought to light by accusations of parents in America, and who, in the 1990s, was convicted for several crimes of child molestation both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, and whose crimes were silently colluded with (covered) by cardinal Sean Brady. During the 1960s and 1970s, the probable time frame of the story, the Catholic Church, in cahoots with the State, had tremendous power over the Irish population, and it was identified with the Nation. It is in that context[95], as we will see below, that the story unfolds.

Folklore is also present, but not in so patent a way as in "Midwife to the Fairies": the world of fairies and how dangerous they can be as well as another motif from fairy legends, the frog, are discreetly woven into the story. Her use of folklore in this instance, as Martina Evans has pointed out, "creates a hair-raising effect, opening a seam between worlds where the truth is around the corner and the reader is compelled to follow" (Evans, 2015: n.p.). Or, using Ní Dhuibhne's own academically informed words, "it […] extend[s] the semantic reach of the new

[93] Also in Portuguese folk tales, according to the protagonist of the autobiographical novel/memoir *Cinco Réis de Gente* by Aquilino Ribeiro (1885-1963), fairies could also be creatures of malevolence: "Was I dreaming or the perverse fairies — there were also those in Custódia's wonder tales — had me changed for another, leaving of me only the bark?" (Ribeiro, 1983: 50)

[94] Cf. *supra*, the discussion on pp. 18-9.

[95] Cf. *supra*, Section 1.1.

text, giving it a universal metaphoric resonance and a mysterious atmosphere." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 212)

To better clarify the concept of rhetorical indirection[96], Jacqueline Fulmer also uses an excerpt from Emily Dickinson which I find peculiarly applicable to this story: "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant—/ Success in Circuit lies … The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind—" (quoted in Fulmer, 2007: 19). The truth is not directly stated as that is not the object of fiction, rather of journalism, and even then, the apposition of a definite article is arguable. Fiction in general, and short stories (as poetry) especially, deal with other ways of conveying alternative truths, which is distinct from lying: "lying is relative to a truth in real life, and fiction is something else, it's just make-believe or a world of fabulation" (Marías, 2019: n.p.). In the case of "The Blind", it seems to me that, more than a denunciation (which in a way it also is) or a report (which it obviously is not), the author is indeed aiming at gradually dazzling the reader with shards of light, slowly and indirectly trying to break the blindness that for so long permitted the Catholic Church to perpetrate such heinous crimes as the ones suggested.

It is also, it seems to me, doing historiographic metafiction in the sense that, as in "Midwife to the Fairies", the story's intertextual metonymy with folkloric invisible dangers (implied in fairies, bluebells' fields, the children's chant and the association of the priest to a hidden frog) is doing a visible rewriting of traditional tales. In that rewriting of how the past was written and its association to the hidden events perpetrated by the Church, the story is illuminating the maltreatment of children and the process by which that history was written over: visible works of charity and educational work with schools, which were the visible tales told to the community. Hidden behind the walls of institutions was another story which most chose not to see. "The Blind", to quote Linda Hutcheon's words on other literary texts, "demands of the reader not only the recognition of textualised traces of the literary[97] and historical past but also the awareness of what has been done—through irony—to those traces". (Hutcheon, 1989: 8)

Some examples of the slow indirect unveiling, whose aesthetic effect is to have us rethink a reality whose conventions of social trust and protection were shattered when the scandalous stories about abuse and maltreatment of children under the shelter of Catholic

[96] Vd. *supra*, p. 59.

[97] In this case, tales from the oral tradition.

Church institutions were made public, are possible to glean, as well as more general allusions to sexual interest in men towards girls, as discussed below.

Right at the beginning, when the character, father Braygy, visits the girls' class, the girls are, through free indirect speech, seduced by the priest into participating in the money collection to help the blind, not only with appeals to their Christian duties to help those in need, but also with references to their physical traits, which instigates in the girls, rather than seeks to deflect (which would be the conventional, expected duty of a priest), a deadly sin, Pride, purportedly the gravest one, as he plays up on the egos of the girls: "extraordinary girls! So clever and good and so neat. And so good-looking. Do you know what, he'd never seen a classful of such beautiful girls!" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 250-1). Another, more general note of sexual deviation towards children, associated with corporeal punishment, and the shame it implies, is suggested when Margaretta uses a bamboo stick as a cane to imitate a blind person: "I knew there was another use for those bamboo canes: you could use them to cane children on their hands, or even on the bare bum. […] She would never have admitted it; no self-respecting child would" (*ibidem*: 256). Later, the narrator comments on how the men "[stare] at her thick dark hair, and her legs in their black stockings". (*ibidem*: 256) That comment also suggests sexual desire towards children on the part of adult males.

As the plot unfolds, and the girls collect enough money to be selected for the party, the reader comes to realise what the taboo images evoked was leading to: the episode of very clear paedophilia on the part of the priest, and the absolute powerlessness of children when confronted with it. Indeed, "[h]e picked her up as if she were a doll and sat her on her lap. I shook my head, but Margaretta did not respond. She sat on his lap as if it were the most normal place in the world to be". (*ibidem*: 263) If there were any doubts in the reader's mind of the sexual allusion involved, Ní Dhuibhne deploys a recurrent image of hers to foreground it, namely, the chocolate that the priest gives the girls as well as the place it comes out: "he had a lot of chocolate in that deep, dark soutane pocket". (*ibidem*: 264) Chocolate is repeatedly deployed, in other short stories, as a symbol for sexual desire. For instance, in "It is a Miracle", the character Sara, when immersed in the water, describes the sunset as "a dark chocolate filled with sweet cream. She'd love to eat it or grasp it" (*ibidem*: 68); another example, in "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams", Detta starts sneezing with uncontrollable desire when she thinks of the sexual possibilities of Karl Brown: "his chocolatey musical voice, a voice designed to accompany unimaginable pleasures". (Ní Dhuibhne, 2007b: 84)

Other brief allusions reinforce the representation of the priest as a predator. First, a repeated emphasis is given to the priest's green eyes[98]: "his round green eyes bulged" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 250); "his green eyes changed colour" (*ibidem*: 251); "his green eyes popped" (*ibidem*: 262). The colour green, as a symbol, is frequently associated with nature and rejuvenation, but also with Ireland, the Irish word *erin* (e.g., in the phrase "Erin go bragh" or "Éirinn go Brách" — Ireland Forever) meaning Ireland. Secondly, the priest is described with allusions to a frog: "he would hop into the room"; "his hair was like slimy river-weed"; "his skin looked like cold rubber", evoking in the narrator an ambivalent feeling, as he appears in the classroom, of discomfort and happiness: "I thought of the fountain in the Green, the water squirting out of the funny sort of pine cone thing in the middle, shooting up in the air and sparkling in the sunshine" (*ibidem*: 250). Later, however, when the girls' storyline and the priest's cross again, that initial feeling of freedom and positive expectation towards both the priest and images of nature is transmogrified into one of discomfort foregrounded by echoes of folk tales (fairyland and its dangers), specifically bluebells:

> It opened when Margaretta pushed it and we went through.
> Inside was another garden. Long green lawns, dotted with circular beds of roses, pink, yellow, red, and rectangular beds of lavender. Copses of trees, their leaves the light, shining green of June, with woodland paths winding sweetly under them, like paths in a storybook. Carpets of bluebells.
> 'We should leave,' I said (*ibidem*: 260-1).

The moment the narrator's eyes fall on the "carpets of bluebells", she feels an ominous note in the air, a narrative pattern in folk tales that warns that something untoward is about to unfold. Her discomfort and anxiety that they are probably transgressing some law by entering a secret garden is underscored by the rhyme that she starts to chant under her breath, "In and Out Goes Dusty Bluebells", a children's street chant that refers to domination of children. Another ominous note is how the pond is described then in the narrative: "Slimy green weeds rubbed against my arm, disgustingly, and I wondered if there were fish in the murky water, or eels, that would nibble my fingers to the bone" (*ibidem*: 262), strongly contrasted with the pond at the beginning, whose water sparkles in the sun. (*ibidem*: 250) The fear patent in the narrator's "We should leave" is related to folklore belief, as "A child who picked bluebells alone would be spirited away by the fairy folk, never to be seen again. Even an adult who ventured into a bluebell wood by themselves was in mortal danger" (Maitland, 2019: n.p.). The street chant

[98] Cf. https://www.thejournal.ie/abuse-brendan-smyth-2175347-Jun2015/, accessed on 25.1.2023 — Brendan Smyth, the priest convicted by paedophilia, also had bulging green eyes and a famously constant broad smile.

could "[refer] to the hiring fairs that took place around April-May, but a group of country children in the 1900s reported that 'the master' in the song was the sinister Fairy King, who like the pied piper, would lead unwary children dancing into the underworld, from which there was no return". (*ibidem*)

It is then that the priest reappears, and the reference to his symbolic status as a monster (not a prince from an international fairy tale[99], but a green-eyed Irish monster) is indubitable: "His green eyes popped. He's like a frog" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 262). The priest is represented as holding Margaretta down on his lap while talking, while she, as if enchanted, is unable to move. The narrator is also chanting under her breath, as if also bewitched by the chocolate that she keeps eating, and the feeling of powerlessness before the figure of authority (the "master" of the chant), who had "an ordinary man's arm, strong, with a thick coat of black hair" (*ibidem*: 262) — one can but remember the wolf from Little Red Riding Hood. The strength of the priest is ineluctable, "because it's the cheerful priest that's talking, so who'd want to listen to a little girl?" (*ibidem*: 263): Margaretta has to endure the ordeal so as to get her charms back (the golden ball from the fairy tale which the prince, like the frog, retrieved for her, but holds back until he gets what he wants), because if she had not, her father, another figure of patriarchal authority, would have "murdered" her. (*ibidem*: 264)

This scene of powerless and silent entrapment until the adult sigh of release, "at last he said 'Ah'" (*ibidem*), further accounts for how hard it was (is) for Margaretta, a victim of child abuse, to denounce the aggressor, since when faced with the abuse, she has to deal with a three-fold authority: that of the aggressor, the all-powerful entity whom no one would care to denounce; that of her father who possibly would see reflected on a reported aggression his repressed desire and would resist the truth; and finally that of the mother who, also a victim of the authority of the Church, would likely choose blind adherence to the mores over denunciating a priest of such unthinkable behaviour.

The story ends confirming, on the one hand, the total incomprehension of the narrator towards the events she witnessed. She was innocent as to the real intentions and covert actions of some adults, as her friend was not. Margaretta represents, with her ability to maneuver adults,

[99] The folk tale "The Frog Prince" was in Ní Dhuibhne's mind when she wrote the story: "I use Grimm's tale, 'The Frog Prince' (ATU tale type 440), as a continuing metaphor: several motifs from the fairy tale — the transformed frog, the fountain, the golden ball — are woven into a story." (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 211) However, she re-eroticised the tale (eating the chocolate while on the priest's lap) and recharged it with the forceful way the will of the girl is set aside with the dictates of patriarchy (how she has to obey the priest to recover her father's gift).

a reconfiguration of childhood innocence in a context when children must grow faster than conventionally expected. On the other, the story also alludes to the reluctance of some adult victims of abuse to shed light on what caused their suffering. The narrator, although she tells the story, when later confronted with an ex-student of the school for the blind, still clings to the public view of the conventional, albeit peculiarly funny, father Braygy, because, had she known what really went on, she would not presumably confront an ex-student with that knowledge with as lightly a comment as "[h]e used to come to our school" (*ibidem*: 264); she would consider it possibly shameful to the man and indiscrete on her part. That man, the "blind telephonist", does not express any emotion; nevertheless, what he says comes out in a tone that betrays his feelings, as he only reproduces a stereotypical representation of priests: "'[…] a lovely man. A heart of gold.'"

Furthermore, the end suggests another collusion, that of the protestant church represented by "The dark green railings of Trinity College" (*ibidem*: 265). In a recently independent Republic, the Anglican Church, if it wanted to survive (Trinity College received state funds too), had to keep silent in relation to the state religion and its doings. All the neighbours had to shelter each other, and the weakest had to endure, not shelter, all the shadows cast by the strongest. This silence is repudiated by the author:

> I am deeply critical of the Catholic Church, but more of the governments and society which allowed it to influence legislation, education, and the entire ethos of Ireland, for so long. And I am critical of the other churches for not protesting louder against the unhealthy collusion of the Irish state with the Catholic hierarchy for so long. (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Fulmer, 2007: 179)

As it was a silence that Éilís Ní Dhuibhne identifies as collective and identity forming, "Irish nationalism […] produced a terribly rigid Catholic, sensorial, punitive society […] which most people now [2003] would have enormous problems with […] [,] we have a legacy of a rigid, illiberal, punishing society which kept women and children down and was frightened of every sexual impulse and of writing" (Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 115), the strategical rhetorical approach to collusion on a topic in which the entire nation was involved has to be indirect, as "pressures on writers continue to constrain expression on abortion, sex, or anything critical of Irish communities, values, or mores" (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Fulmer, 2007: 48).

Folkloric allusions (children being talked to by enchanting priests in enchanted Bluebell-bedecked gardens, eating chocolate and chanting innocuous street rhymes from the 19th Century) is an example of a discreet "interweaving technique as a consciousness-raising strategy" (Lynch *apud* Wulff, 2017: 67) i.e., indirectly reaching the blindness that wants

unveiling as it is too gruesome either to look at directly or to leave unseen. "Tell all the Truth", Emily Dickinson urged the poet. Ní Dhuibhne does so in "The Blind", and this is where she comes from:

> I am in fact quite critical of the Catholic Church, of its attitude to women, of its cruelty to children in its orphanages and schools in the past. My feeling is however that the whole of Irish society colluded with all of this ghastly misbehaviour, that the society had the church it wanted. It was at certain stages a deeply sadistic, cruel society, of which the Catholic Church was a part, and which the Protestant Churches ignored, maintained their position on the margins, looked on and said nothing. (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Fulmer, 2007: 179)

As I have written above, the story seems to refer to true events relative to father Brendan Smyth. One has simply to go online and search for paedophilic priests in Ireland and his name immediately pops up, and by looking at the several photographs deduce that the green eyes and the constant grin on his face is the same as that represented in the story. However, there are more hints which connect the story with that case. Being a story written in the realistic mode, the reader can assume that references to space are references to real, though fictionalised, locations, even if one must be attentive to the fact that "narrative space [can be read] as a reflection of the primary themes of the story" (Hagan, 2012: s.p.). It the case of this story, it proved hard to establish with some level of verisimilitude the actual place where the story is set: there are references to locations in Northern Ireland ("At about half past eleven[100] I left my post outside the poultry shop and walked down Donegall Street" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 253), as there is also a reference to Shandon, in Cork and to a Hollywood, in County Wicklow; and the story ends in Dublin. It is clear to me that the reference to Donegall Street and the pinpointing of that hour (too much of a coincidence to go unnoticed by the author, in my opinion) could be a referent to the other troubles latent in Irish society that one does not usually hear about because of The Troubles and its media prominence, as well as to the fact that it was the birthplace of father Brendan and where he was first convicted. As to all the other disparate empirical place referents throughout the Republic, they could point to how Father Brendan evaded police while hiding in the Republic under the protection of the Church, which led to a government collapse in 1994.

There are many references to "the world" (cf. Hutcheon, *idem*: 4), but they are woven in such a way as to render the "real" referent unclear. The story highlights the fact that "realism

[100] It was at that hour, on March 20th, 1972, that there was a bombing which resulted in multiple deaths because of misdirection on part of the IRA bombers as to the real whereabouts of the bomb, which ended up exploding in Donegall Street at a time when the street was crowded with lots of people among whom, significantly children.

is really a set of conventions" (*ibidem*, 6) and foregrounds that "historiographic metafiction challenges […] both any naïve realist concept of representation and any equally naïve textualist of formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world." (*ibidem*) In other words, while it is not history it is not simple story either, but an hybrid of both: a true yarn of community and a tale of intertextuality, in the sense that the way in which a community narrates itself is so fraught with interwoven and closely knit texts that it is impossible to escape them, as they either provide shelter or shadow, but never the possibility of turning a blind eye.

3.4 - "The Shelter of Neighbours" — Shadow or shade?

"The Shelter of Neighbours" is the centre of the group of six stories that constitute what Elke D'hoker, in *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story*, calls a short story cycle, when she discusses how some interlinked stories work in "staging community" (D'hoker, 2016:111). This strategy functions, she goes on to argue, as a way of accommodating a group of characters, something not easily accomplished in a single short story, while still focusing primarily on the individual, which is what short stories generally tend to do (*ibidem*). In fact, the group of stories set in Dunroon Crescent does qualify the category "short story [cycle] unified by place […] used to dramatize and question community life, since separate stories and individual lives can be brought together within a larger communal network" (*ibidem*: 112). The characters in the six stories are aware of the existence of each other (they appear fleetingly here and there in the different stories), thus forming a fine network of cross-references that expresses "both the plight of an individual and the fate of a community" (Pacht *apud* D'hoker, 2016: 119).

This story, told from the perspective of Martha, the protagonist, can be thought of as the centre of the cycle for two reasons. First, it is in it that the thematic focus of the collection is given. From here it spans to the rest of the stories, including those that do not belong to the Dunroon cycle proper. I refer to the premise implied in the title, and taken from an Irish proverb, according to which individuals depend on and are conditioned by a community. The double meaning of the Irish word "scáth" (both "shelter" and "shadow") is lost in the English word "shelter", when translating the Irish proverb *Ar Scáth a Chéile a Mhaireann na Daoine* ("people live in one another's shelter or shadow"), which is alluded to in the title. You could also argue that the use of "shelter" is meant to be read ironically, and that the neighbours really are a shadow, a negative influence, when in the past, from the romanticised perspective of Linda or

of Mitzi, were perceived as more of a shelter. In either case, the apparent loss in the translation seems rather to diffract[101] the link with the past and signal that, although it is the inevitable to move on with life, we can retain and incorporate memories of and behaviours from how we think it once was. How you read the title seems to inflect how you read the individual stories. Secondly, all the characters of Dunroon Crescent are mentioned in this story. It is as if, in some way, Martha's decision in the end will either come from the strength or the weakness of the bonds that link the community together, or, conversely, weaken or strengthen those bonds.

The bond between Martha, the protagonist, and Mitzi, another character, arose when Mitzi offered to stay with Martha's son, Luke, who was in hospital on account of his illness, and of Martha's inability, as a civil servant, to be with him herself. Later in the story, because she is losing money in the recession, tension between the two arises when Mitzi criticises civil servants. According to her, civil servants are able to claim sick leave at will, and thus, she, as most people do (cf. *ibidem*: 122), blames them for the downturn in the economy. As she blabbers on about that urban myth, she momentarily forgets that Martha is a civil servant and could not be with Luke when he was dying. They fall out because of that. Later still, Martha, unable to sleep, goes outside and sees Mitzi's daughter, Siobhán, returning home shortly after her ex-boyfriend's Polish girlfriend is knifed dead. When the police come to question the neighbours, Martha is faced with the hard decision: does she mention having seen Siobhán, thereby avenging Mitzi's offense, or will she remain silent about it, thereby thanking Mitzi for having been there with Luke when he needed company? Before deciding, the argument implied in the title is set to the test, as all the characters are visited and, so to speak, questioned as to their neighbourliness.

The first character referred to by Martha is Finn O'Keefe, from "The Man Who Had No Story", as she contemplates from her window the dawn, before everyone awakes, as though looking at a blank page where the story will be written: "when they wake up […] [and] all the hassle starts" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 108). We are given new information here about Finn, the fact that he supposedly drinks, or at least that is the assumption of those living in the estate. This is an indication, on the one hand, that what Martha knows about Finn is inflected by her perspective and therefore could be the result of hearsay or prejudice, and, on the other hand, that the inhabitants of the community are aware of each other's secrets and are keepers of those secrets. As Elke D'hoker points out, quoting Ní Chonchúir, whose 2012 review of the collection

[101] To use D. Haraway and K. Barad's concept and signal the resulting hybridity between past and present, as used and discussed in Graham, 2017: 63-4.

I was unable to retrieve, "Dunroon may be the Anglicized version of the Irish "Dún Rún", or "Fort of Secrets" […] [as the] characters are generally very adept at keeping their lives and secrets to themselves" (D'hoker, 2016: 133). The character's dilemma at the end of the story is here in a way introduced: is she going to keep the secret and maintain the cohesion of the community, or is she going to disrupt that familiar network, and spill the beans, and thus, while "writing" her view of events, contribute to the hassle?

The second character mentioned is Clara Byrne, from "Trespasses". The dependency between neighbours is foregrounded, from one side, and tinged with violence, from the other. Martha, who is usually tolerant of Clara's dog on account of Clara feeding Martha's cat when Martha is away, as Martha does Clara's dog when Clara is away — this mutual arrangement is mentioned in "Trespasses" (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 95) —, kicks Bran in the butt, thus signaling that, if provoked, she can deny that mutual understanding. Clara is further mentioned as the object of general tolerance in the face of illegality: "they didn't report her because they felt sorry for her. Single mum". (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 115) This short sentence alludes subtly to the importance of female solidarity in the face of hardship, which will also condition Martha's decision. It also suggests another of the issues at stake, that will be present at the end of the story: will the smaller Dunroon community be strong enough to resist the pressure of the general community personified by the police, or will public law, of which Martha is a representative (she is not only a public servant but also works in Four Courts, the *locus* of Justice), subsume the private "law", and lead Martha to betray the local community? Will, furthermore, the indifference that Clara shows towards the old couple , in "Trespasses", by parking her car in their driveway when they were expecting her daughter to visit them or to arrive home (cf. *ibidem*: 104), and which Mitzy also shows when blaming the civil servants for the downturn in the economy, lead to Martha's denouncing Siobhán and thus destroy a family, as Clara destroyed one by killing the old woman?

Next to be mentioned is the protagonist from "Red Hot Poker", Linda Talbot, who is described as having "a sharper tongu[e]" (*ibidem*: 115). She is a widow who is having an affair with Denis, a neighbour's husband, and who is herself cheated by that same neighbour, Tressa, whom she at first perceives as a good person (*ibidem*: 192), when these neighbours approach her and try to comfort her. Linda has this erroneous perception because, firstly, she was tender and susceptible after her husband died, and, secondly, because she is a believer in good neighbourliness, of the kind she equates with a (better) time when neighbours dropped in unannounced: "Such a small thing, but nobody calls by any more these days without phoning.

Not where I live anyway, out in the suburbs. That visit brought me back to my childhood, when dropping in on a friend, a neighbour, was the most normal thing in the world." (*ibidem*) Later she has to resort to violence to protect herself. The couple's ultimate objective seems to have been stealing the money that she has at home. She hid it mostly on Martha's advice concerning the probable downturn in the economy (*ibidem*: 189) and due to careless enthusiasm with Denis's abilities in bed she may have told it to him: "You could — I could — tell him anything". (*ibidem*: 198) And she is not sure if she did tell him: "I told him a great deal, but hardly that". (*ibidem*: 200) This story is a rewriting of an urban legend of theft, Type C2 (Ní Dhuibhne, 1983: 57-6), and it counterpoints Linda's child memories of harmony among neighbours. At the end of the story, she has a sort of epiphany which, considering Linda's unreliability of perception and general cynical attitude towards life, should be taken with a pinch of salt: "no matter how lucky you seem to be, in the end there is nobody taking care of you. No god, no friend, no husband, no lover. No neighbour. In the end you're on your own." (*ibidem*: 202) To sum up, there is no shelter in neighbours.

Another character is Audrey Bailey, from "The Sugar Loaf", "single and eccentric" (*ibidem*: 113) or, according to her next-door neighbour, Linda Talbot, "a nasty piece of work" (*ibidem*: 192), although she is there, smiling at Linda and not at all nastily (*ibidem*: 201), when "Red Hot Poker" ends. Audrey has recently lost her mother in the story she is the protagonist of. In that story she is portrayed as being anxious and snappy (*ibidem*: 149). She never married; Padráig, the man she loved, and the only person who caused her to feel relaxed and herself (*ibidem*: 153), went away to America and she decided to stay with her parents, obeying her father (*ibidem*: 152). After he dies, she continues to take care of her mother, but it is as if Audrey resents her, although that does not come clearly from reading the story except in the way she always snaps at her, automatically. The fact she stayed behind, unlike her brother Ben, who went on with his life as emigrant in England, has stifled, so to speak, her life force: she does not clean her house, does not bother herself with her physical appearance nor with her health. Although, significantly, she dyes her hair with "iced-chocolate" brown (*ibidem*: 141). From my point of view, bearing in mind how Ní Dhuibhne usually associates chocolate with sexual desire[102], the repetition of iced-chocolate three times on the same page, when she reflects on how attractive she felt her hair used to be, foregrounds the possibility that not following her lover against her father's better judgment maimed her personality and caused her bitterness.

[102] Vd. *supra* p. 59.

Audrey's favourite character in John McGahern's[103] novel, *Amongst Women* (1990), is Luke (*ibidem*: 141), Michael Moran's son who ran away (and stayed away) from the view of life represented by his father, a tyrannical patriarchal figure who fought in the Anglo-Irish War, a figure of unquestionable authority. There's a moment in "The Sugar Loaf" when Audrey recognizes that she lost her "light" [104] when she chose to stay with her parents: "The realization, which should have come to her that summer all those long years ago, is like a light going on in her brain. A light that makes her feel very sick and very well at exactly the same time" (*ibidem*: 153) Besides, Audrey teaches in the school where Martha had hoped to enroll her then not-yet-born son Luke, who was also lost. Both characters are connected by the loss of light / Luke, even though the connection is not clear to the reader.

Audrey saw Pádraig again, when she eventually decided to climb the Sugar Loaf, do something that her father (and mother) never did when she and her brother were kids. We do not get to know if they get in touch again, if he looks her name up in the phonebook (*ibidem*). But there is that possibility. As we do not know what Martha will decide to say to the Gardaí. Nevertheless, that is the essence of story: "The Shelter of Neighbours" opens (starts being written?) with another metaphor of light: "there's a rosy stripe in the navy-blue sky over the houses on the other side of the street: Dunroon Crescent is edging into daylight" (*ibidem*: 108), a beautifully literary sentence in the way it evokes the beginning of a story, the opening of doors, of possibilities.

Lastly, Ingrid Stafford, from "The Shortcut Through IKEA", is mentioned. She "was in college, getting a law degree — there was a lot of work in conveyancing because the property market was so strong". (*ibidem*: 119) In this story, this character and the entrepreneurial Mitzi represent, not only the new careers available to women when the Celtic Tiger took off, around 1995, but also the cosmopolitanism and materialism that the boom years entailed. In my reading, she also makes us think, for the second time, of another character with ties to Dunroon, Sara from "It is a Miracle": Ingrid is a Swedish immigrant in Ireland, who is homesick for the life she could have had if she had continued her relationship with Tomas (Sarah's partner's name is Thomas), and Sara is an Irish emigrant in Sweden (although she is of Lithuanian Jewish

[103] John McGahern (1934-2006) is considered one of the most important Irish writers of the second half of the 20th century. He was censored because of his books' sexual content and dismissed from teaching. Consequently, he had to find work in England to subsist. *Amongst Women* is his best-known book.

[104] From *luce*, light in Latin; Martha, if she had had a girl, would have called her Lucy.

descent), who is in an unsatisfying relationship. Furthermore, Sara has lived in Dunroon[105]: "back in Dunroon, when Sara was a child" (*ibidem*: 85). However, she got away, she is living outside the Dunroon loop in a (fairy)tale of her own, not in the reality of this tale, where the people who stayed "had the same fantasy, as, glued together into one writhing snake of human flesh, they lurched from the suburbs into the city. And it wasn't an erotic daydream [presumably like the one Sara goes through in a restaurant in Austria (cf. *supra*)]. The fantasy was about Jews on the trains going to the concentration camps". (*ibidem*: 85) She, Sara, was another one, like Audrey's brother (and McGahern's Luke) who managed to escape the loop; she however, seems to see the possibility of some community bonds, also via her Jewish heritage, with Ernesto, an apparently earnest man. Curiously she had her epiphanic moment in mid-loop while standing upside-down in a broken-down rollercoaster.

The reference to trains and Jews and escape to Sweden might foreground the difficulties that women had to go through in Ireland to keep their jobs: "The train. Work. Sleep. The train. Work. Sleep" (*ibidem*: 116), and how hard it was for Martha riding the loop in that grinding routine. Furthermore, she lived with a married man, a schoolteacher at that[106], who could not get a divorce when they got together. Nevertheless, she is later involved "in Family Law when it expanded and got very busy in 1997 after divorce came in" (*ibidem*: 115), which may also explain her special involvement in her job. The difference between Martha and the other women, particularly Mitzy, is two-sided: age and class. Although Martha finished her secondary school and got a college education (cf. *ibidem*: 115), her opting for the public sector and not being married meant that she could have a career but received little money: work as civil servants or in the liberal professions was a privilege Irish women were starting to have access to, though the right to better wages was not yet discussed. Seamus, Martha's partner, is also a civil servant, and presumably has financial obligations towards his son, and because money does not stretch, Martha cannot not have a job. Besides, being of a generation of women (more) conscious of their rights, she "would as soon have given back her new entitlements to equality and jobs as she would have handed in her voting card" (*ibidem*: 117). The fact that the "other Dunroon Crescent women" (*ibidem*: 117) had started early marrying and having children meant that while Martha was working hard to strengthen her career, they already had free time:

[105] This character is what makes this story "It is a Miracle" the seventh in the "Dunroon cycle". She is never mentioned as that in the critical bibliography I had access to, maybe because she no longer lives there and none of the action of "It is a Miracle" takes place in Dunroon.

[106] This is an indirect reference to John McGahern's biography. (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 114)

"[s]o it took a long time to get to know the neighbours. And if you spend too long getting to know people, you never become close friends" (*ibidem*). She thus represents the working woman who must struggle to make ends meet, especially because of the more expensive housing estate the couple choose to live in, supposedly with an expensive mortgage — as opposed to the "Corporation housing estate at the other side of the railway line" (*ibidem*: 109). Besides the class difference, there is the age difference. On the one hand, when Martha refers to Mitzi's husband's opinion of herself, the difference in class is suggested in the use of language: it "was as if he suspected she was capable something abrupt and untoward" (*ibidem*: 110); the use of "abrupt and untoward" suggests an upper-class use of language. On the other hand, this comment echoes how Martha describes her prejudiced fear of "young men in hoodies" (*ibidem*: 109) from Lourdes Gardens, which points to the age difference between Mitzi and Martha (a younger woman, not in a hoodie, but possibly violent).

Even though there is interconnectedness between all the women in Dunroon Crescent in the fact that they and all their particular stories are brought together in this short story, and even though some of the links between them show some cooperation (Martha and Clara caring for each other's pets; the more crucial example of Mitzy being with Luke while Martha is working; also the first smile Audrey ever gives Linda, the tenuous possibility of an understanding), there are also indications of an "undercurrent of violence" (D'hoker, 2016: 135): Martha kicking Bran the dog; the murder of the Polish girl, in this story; the murder occasioned by a dispute related to parking and indifference to others (selfishness) in "Trespasses"; a burnt and broken hand in "Red-Hot Poker"; the constant snapping of Audrey even knowing her mother has a weak heart. The society portrayed here is a society suffering the loss of the promise of wealth that the Celtic Tiger represented, and that the suburb in what was once farmland also stands for. Among the financial ruins of the downturn the fight for scraps is represented as sometimes brutal in what was once, reputedly, traditional peacefulness.

This contemporary setting of mostly women living in the possible social organisation of the suburb is counterpointed, by the deployment of a traditional (more rural) Irish proverb, with past ways of organising communities, and comments on how Irish contemporary society has evolved. It is Mitzy who brings to the fore a possible contrast between how things (supposedly) used to be in rural environments, even though her perspective could be read as delusional in how the past is "romanticised", just like Linda Talbot's (vd. *supra*, p. 76): "'you belonged not just to your family, but to a community. Everyone knew everyone. And looked out for them. *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*.' She quoted the well-known proverb in Irish, about

neighbours depending on one another" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 120-121). Mitzy helped Martha out when she needed someone to stay with her son, she provided a shelter for a lonely child and helped a neighbour. She also comments on how nowadays life is (supposedly) harder for children: "It's so different now for the kids in the suburbs" (*ibidem*: 121). Martha, earlier in the story, also commented on how kids these days look like they are suffering "[t]hose eyes they have […] they're so sad and angry" (*ibidem*: 109). In the "critique of the individualism and materialism of contemporary Ireland" (D'hoker, 2016: 135) Martha and Mitzy represent the two sides of the same coin. What this short story invites the reader to do is not so much to decide on who is right or wrong, but rather on what the reader would do if confronted with the several questions which are put. Indeed, how would they write it, solve the hassle, and fill the blank page?

Both women, in different ways, represent individualism and materialism, both are prone to prejudice concerning others, seen as threats, either because of class or nationality. Martha refers to the young men in hoodies as dangerous because they look aggressive and live in Lourdes Gardens, "at the other side of the railway line" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 109), i.e., belong to a lower class. Mitzy refers to the Polish girl as "some tart from Poland" (*ibidem*: 121), reflecting Irish prejudice against immigrants. Martha did not give up her job even when her son was dying. "If she gave up her job, she knew she would never get another one. […] she wouldn't be able to pay the mortgage, she wouldn't be able to support Luke" (*ibidem*: 127), representing with that attitude the cost of reconfigured conventional motherhood, as she places her financial independence first and being with her dying son second. Mitzy, likewise, when her daughter was having drug issues, treated it lightly, almost indifferently, like an object: "[s]he was carted off to hospital. […] Mitzy shrugged. 'She's back at work.'" (*ibidem*: 121-2) The mothers of contemporary Ireland no longer reflect the traditional views of what a mother or a woman or a daughter ought to be (self-sacrificing, in the image of the Virgin Mary), but rather put their individual wishes and aspirations foremost in their list of priorities. Audrey, who sacrifices for her parents because she was her father's "little monkey" (*ibidem*: 151), did not, and consequently she is portrayed as bitter and too fond of wine. (*ibidem*: 149)

Throughout the story there are subtle hints that Martha is a little jealous of Mitzy for being more beautiful and later richer than she is, for not having to feel the grinding routine of train, work, sleep, and Mitzy shows indifference and individualism in her comment about civil servants — both are materialists and individualists, represented as potentially as cruel as the woman who denied Martha leave of absence to take care of Luke:

> When Martha explained the situation to the Personnel Officer, that person — a woman — made her feel that she was a malingerer, trying to cheat the system. She made her feel that she was the typical new type of public servant, the working mother, who now wanted the system to bend over backwards to grant her favours and privileges, which no public servant had ever had before, because until a few years ago there were no mothers, no married women, messing things up. They'd been obliged to resign on marriage; now there was all this change, this chaos. (*ibidem*: 127)

The change and chaos (another kind of hassle) implied are brought about by the presence of women and their obligations towards children in the workplace, which earlier was simpler because it was only populated by men, who did not get pregnant nor had to stay home to mind sick children. It is a man, in the end, who "turns a blind eye", "[t]hey would not report her to Personnel" (*ibidem*: 127), and allows Martha to be with Luke, in contrast with the cruelty and generalisations of the person from Personnel, underscored in the text as "a woman". The question arises: are women as cruel as men? Is there no shelter amongst women, only shadow?

The intertextual implication of using allusions to *Amongst Women* could be that as Ireland evolved from a traditional, rural post-war of independence patriarchal structure, during which men, represented in McGahern's novel by Michael Moran, ruled, another kind of cruelty is played out by women in a modern, individualistic, and materialistic Ireland. However, at the closing of the story, the intertextuality also evoked is again, I think, another story of the collection, "Illumination", and this one reinforces the light metaphor referred to above: "[a]t that moment the streetlamps go on, illuminating the hedge and the footpath" (*ibidem*: 128). In fact, in that story, a woman (one of the three first person narrators of the collection) reflects on writing, which most approaches the author metafictionally reflecting on the craft of writing. In one of those moments of reflection, the character (nameless) contrasts "the idyllic summer woodlands of a Russian dacha, painted in Chekov's watercolour" to "the urban jangle of irony, menace and gruesome murder, which is the stock in trade of contemporary fiction" (*ibidem*: 29). In another, while discussing with Marcus the modern novel, the character further says that "[t]he idea of a fragmented universe, mirrored in the fractured novel or work of art, was interesting, valid at the level of thought, but it had failed artistically because a fractured narrative is not enjoyable — it just does not work" (*ibidem*: 38). Or does it?

Is it really nothing more than "writ[ing] only what has been written — in a slightly different way — a million times already"? (*ibidem*: 39) Is this not the question that blocked Finn O'Keefe, in "The Man Who Had No Story"?

"The Shelter of Neighbours", as many of the stories by Ní Dhuibhne that I have read so far, seems to solve Finn's dilemma (where to find the trigger for a story), by writing a Chekov watercolour in the urban jangle of irony, in the sense that the beautiful strokes of light and shade, instead of providing a comfortable ending, or even an epiphanic moment, show real people and their inconsistencies represented as not having definite answers but mostly doubts. The difference is that, whereas Chekov provided the tranquility of "clear sentences and meandering thoughts" (*ibidem*: 29), this story, being a contemporary piece of fiction, will sound not like the Fifth Symphony, but rather like one of Frederike's musical pieces: they represent "musical alienation and disconnection […] randomness. There are many long pauses […] one of […] [the] compositions consisted only of fifteen minutes of silence, fenced between two single notes" (*ibidem*).

In "The Shelter of Neighbours", after all the hassle of the day, after all the questions and doubts, all the disconnectedness and chaos, we are left with precisely that, silence, and the blank page whence it all came out: what will Martha do? Will she keep the secret and maintain the cohesion of the community, or will she disrupt that familiar network, and spill the beans? Will she denounce Mitzy and destroy her family, taking revenge because of the putative offense in a parroting of an urban myth, or will she keep silent and deny the justice represented by her job? Will the smaller Dunroon community be strong enough to resist the pressure of the official community personified by the police? Will it be shelter or shade? The question seems irrelevant, and the moral, if there has to be any, could be *is fearr an troid ná an t-uaigneas*, "[t]he fighting is better than the loneliness" (*ibidem*: 12), as good an answer to why write as any.

The community of the neighbourhood, halfway between the macro-community of Ireland and the micro-communities of couples or friends, offers us views of the one and the others and how all are interconnected. While doing that, the group of stories metonymically reflect the macro-community of Celtic Tiger and post-affluence Ireland. It also provides glimpses on how the variegated micro-communities coexist in all the skirmishes this interconnectedness propitiates. Furthermore, it brings to the fore how the past is reconfigured in contemporary Ireland, and the dichotomy between past and present is diffracted. Be it shade or shadow, the neighbours merely try to find a means of surviving the day. The community is

yarned every day and all the multifarious perspectives are "embroider[ed] [in] a very complicated [way]"[107]. (cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2007b: 92)

[107] A similar kind of rewriting of community was intuited in the author's contribution to Dermot Bolger's *Ladies Night at Finbar's Hotel* (2000), "The Master Key" (cf. p. 150: "She believed she was gaining illuminating insights into human nature in all its wondrous variety in the bedrooms of Finbar's Hotel"), later reissued in *Midwife to the Fairies and Other Stories* (2007) as "Holiday in the Land of Murdered Dreams".

Conclusion

Yarning the last threads

After such a long and complex route, one is left with a double anxiety: first, when will Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's next collection of short stories[108] or novel come out? And secondly how much did I leave to be discussed? As I said to one of my colleagues when we graduated, now I feel ready to start it all over again and to do it properly this time. Be that as it may, my journey took me through the context of contemporary Irish women writers to Ní Dhuibhne's place in it and in the canon of Irish Literature.

As stated in the previous chapters, from very early on she was nurtured on literature for young people in English (cf, Ní Dhuibhne, 2021: 136-7), in the protected environment of home and local library. Later, in the more exposed setting of school and university, her focus contracted into English literature taught and written by men (*ibidem*: 132-3), except in the case of Jane Austen, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson. (*ibidem*: 135) Her wish to become a writer was associated to how much Ní Dhuibhne loved Enid Blyton's books (*ibidem*: 131 & 134). Yet however much she treasured her youth readings (she reoriented that earlier love to her literature for young people in Irish), other issues manifested themselves in the process of becoming an adult in Ireland.

Her self-awareness as a woman who was not expected to be vocal as to that same fact was one of the issues. On the contrary, Irish society's assumptions regarding the role of women, assumptions shared by the women themselves, were in the opposite direction: "Women in Ireland were expected to be modest, retiring, lady-like. A writer reveals too much, she reveals her heart and her soul, and, even worse, secrets to do with her body. It's ok for a man to do that, but how could a decent Irish girl possibly consider such a thing?" (*ibidem*: 135) Even though she was advised otherwise, she ended up writing about those things even if under cover of a pseudonym. She published "Green Fuse", as well as other stories (vd. Chapter 1, Section 1.3) focused on herself and, under the influence of Canadian writer Alice Munro, she also wrote about her ancestors (*ibidem*: 139). Another issue that became central in her life and later in her writing was folklore. In the years between her first published short story and her first published collection, *Blood and Water* (1988), Éilís Ní Dhuibhne graduated, did a Ph.D in folklore,

[108] I have always elected the novel as my favourite form of fiction. Now, however, I do not look at the short story as a minor form, and for that I am thankful to the Irish Women Writers' Seminar.

married and had two children. She already had a strong sense of what it (had) meant to be a woman, a wife, a working mother and a writer[109], and it is then that she finds a cause to justify and confirm the need for all the effort in that juggling: "when my eyes were opened by feminism in the 1980s, I understood the importance of sticking to the last. It was no longer just about me and my compulsions. I had a cause." (*ibidem*: 145) She kept on writing (and being a mother, a wife and a scholar) because she felt that doing it from a feminist perspective gave her writing not only more personal sense but also a wider political range as a person.

Based on these two main issues, a woman writer in a patriarchal and misogynist society and a folklorist in a country giving its first steps towards cosmopolitanism, after decades of being closed in on itself, Ní Dhuibhne developed her very peculiar brand of Irishness. Her stories are written from the perspective of Irish women and, in most of them, she incorporates folk tales (fairy tales, legends, urban and traditional myths) whose perspective is also that of women. Her stance is feminist in that the protagonists she elects are mostly women struggling to inscribe their subjective identity and their agency in the world, specifically in the Ireland from the 1970s to the 2020s; likewise, the folk tales she chooses to interweave in her contemporary stories have themselves women protagonists whose plights seem not to be dissimilar to the ones portrayed in the modern tales.

The period of the stories which I chose to discuss in detail lies within that timeframe. As her main writing strategy, she resorts to intertextually juxtaposing complete folk tales, or their motifs, with stories told in the realist mode. This creates a metafictional effect that leads the reader into questioning received narratives about the socio-historical context in which the stories of the past and of the present are set, and in turn contributes to possibilities of a future in a community — new narrative possibilities. The same can be said of other types of intertextuality the author is also fond of using, namely the more or less veiled allusions to other works of fiction from Western literature, from the Middle Ages to contemporary literature, which, in her own words, while discussing the intertextuality between Homer and Joyce, "gives a depth and a universality to the individual experience. It places them [the works] in their context in the history of the world". (Ní Dhuibhne *apud* Moloney & Thompson, 2003: 111) There is also the effect of metaphorical enhancement common to both intertextual uses, the literary and the folkloric: "it extends the semantic reach of the new text, giving it a universal metaphoric resonance and a mysterious atmosphere" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2014: 212), this very last

[109] Cf. *ibidem*: 140-1, especially how her words reveal the implied pressure of dealing with work, children, marriage and the need to write.

aspect refers to when the partial allusions (or "intertextual metonymy") to folk tales create a "fairy tale atmosphere". (*ibidem*: 206)

All these features, namely, a feminist approach to the plights of women in the Ireland of the last fifty or so years, as well as the intertextually juxtaposed tales from both the literary and the folklore traditions, contribute to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's peculiar sense of place. The communities she observes and artistically represents are transformed and recreated with at the same time a clear sense that the communities themselves are a result of other representations: a rural traditional one, a literary one and a contemporary one. They all gain visibility either through folk tales, literary texts or through contemporary representations of Ireland (such as the dominant one of cosmopolitanism during the boom years). These three different narrative veins, or weaving threads, are tapped into or intertwined to produce alternative representations of community to that produced, for example, by the affluence of the Celtic Tiger years.

In the stories I discussed above, in Chapter 3, the folkloric past is both valued as a resource and looked at critically to unveil the prevailing ideology of past times, which, as said above, was patriarchal. That unveiling resonates with the same act of looking and showing the author frequently casts on the recent past of the Republic. Its nationalist hegemonic ideology was also preponderantly one of eliding and electing what should or should not be accepted or told (as hegemonic ideologies, such as the nationalist, tend to do). Similarly, the contemporary present of the stories discussed, the years of affluence and the post-boom period (for example), are also looked at critically. This means rejecting what is detrimental in it (e.g. generalised commodification, including folklore and women's writing, and the active forgetting[110] of all the supposedly communal values of the past) and incorporating what in it is beneficial. The resulting hybrid is conducive to the building (rewriting, rethinking) of an inclusive contemporary community, in which the values from the past are incorporated.

Ní Dhuibhne's Irishness lies in what one could call active remembering. The peculiar way she embroiders her fictions not only brings back the past to bear on the present, as it also leads the present to reverberate in the past, making of her interwoven yarns an original way of building community. Its originality lies precisely in the hybridity of her writing, but in Jacqueline Lo's second application of the term, according to Rebecca Pelan in her Introduction to *Éilís Ní Dhuibhne—Perspectives*: "the term hybridity retains its potential to unsettle and

[110] In the sense used by Claire Braken quoted by Susan Cahill, who, in turn, terms it "amnesiac drive". (Cf. Cahill, 2018: 428-9)

dismantle hegemonic relations through a focus on the process of negotiation and contestation between cultures". (Pelan, 2009: 13) Thus, it is not a simple return to the past, nor a romantization of the past, that the author proposes, but rather, using Bakhtin's words to clarify Ní Dhuibhne's method, "an artistically organised system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another". (Bakhtin *apud* Pelan, *idem*: 14) I read "language" here as discourse or *narrative* in the sense I used above when I mentioned "new narrative possibilities".

The use of the word "illumination" above is fortuitous here[111], though fortunate, as it (almost) uncannily points to "Illumination", a story much referenced to throughout this dissertation. In it the (nameless) narrator asks a series of questions which reverberate throughout the collection, especially the last two: "What is writing for? What is life for?" (Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 39) The hybrid nature of her stories, which I call yarns of community, foregrounds a dynamics between past and present in which both illumine one another, and the view of community it seeks to put forward is one through which the individual and the community can relate without one subsuming the other. Hybridity presupposes cohabitation or, at the very least, coexistence but on an equal basis. Her stories, therefore, much centered in the reconfiguration of conventional figurations of womanhood from a feminist perspective, cast light on human relations, be it the couple, the neighbourhood, or the country, and focus on ways of finding equilibria between those different types of community (micro and macro)[112]. In different ways, when the power imbalance in the community is not achieved, one of the elements (e.g., man/woman; individual/society) is kept in the shadow and this type of relationship leads to elision where the stronger element forces itself (usually himself or themselves) on the other (usually herself). However, when the balance is sought actively (when, for example in a couple, her story is heard, her version accepted, her life respected) an active coexistence can be attained and a shelter found in the other, that is, a deeper, enhanced meaning can be found in that community, micro or macro. Neighbours can indeed become shelters.

So "what is writing for?" And for that matter "What is life for?" As social animals, writing can only make sense as a socialising enterprise, in the sense that it promotes integration of human subjects in a society; deflates the pressures of daily efforts to survive by giving comfort through the company of others; teaches that silence and reading (as listening) are pre-

[111] As Mikhail Bahktin (1895-1975) did not, evidently, have Ní Dhuibhne in mind when he wrote his *Dialogic Imagination* essays between 1934 and 1941.

[112] Cf. *supra* Section 1.4.

requisites to communal living; dissolves the apparent solidity of preconceived ideas; leads us to understanding the Other as fundamentally the same, thus foregrounding empathy. The list can possibly go on and on, since from early on, when we sat by the fire, listening to the stories of others gave us *focus* and the focus was *us* when mostly the tendency is to believe the internal monologue of the *I*. Telling stories has always been that, yarning communities. In Ireland writing short stories, a genre which has a complex relationship to the oral tradition (vd. Ingman, 2009: 3), assumed a preponderance which seems undeniable, and in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne I perceive a strong sense of the effort to build community, especially because of her narrative strategy of incorporating folklore, which "provides a sense of community". (Wulff, 2017: 63) Writing (as living) is thus that, yarning community and, as part of it, being aware of our fundamental interconnectedness, not only as individuals in a specific place but also as individuals in a present refracted by values from the past.

On a final note, if asked to start over or if I had to consider what I could possibly do to expand and hopefully improve, I believe I would reinforce the critical framework I used to approach the texts. I am aware that my approach is made from a feminist and other expressions of Critical Theory's framework, while also venturing into folklore studies. Taking for granted possible critical shortcomings in those three areas, that would be a clear path to improvement.

An ecocritical approach would perhaps be a possibility with interest. Nature is represented mostly positively in *The Shelter*, usually as a *locus amoenus* for the protagonists, through which their intimate feelings are expressed. Almost all the stories (in *The Shelter*, but also in the other collections and in her novels in English), have references to nature either as a place of refuge (gardens[113]) or as hurt by progress, for instance, in "The Man Who Had No Story", the reference to the sick Pangur Bán (*ibidem*: 2), or when mention is made to the flattened foxes on the road shoulders. (*ibidem*: 6) In this story also the weather plays a role in deepening the confusion of the protagonist. It is as if the rain represents nature's resentment (denying the pleasure of sunny holidays to Finn) to all the roads and cars. Therefore, an ecocritical approach does not seem at all objectless as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, already in *The Bray House* (1990)[114], had a clear notion that "the earth's life support systems were under stress" (Glotfelty, 1996: xvi), as she also had in "The Pale Gold of Alaska" (2000). There, the

[113] In "The Blind" the garden in the school for the blind is simultaneously a place of wonderful beauty and an ominous location when the mention of bluebells evokes the wee people and their peculiar tendency to abduct infants. (Cf. Ní Dhuibhne, 2012: 261)

[114] The same year "a US president [declared] […] 'the decade of the environment' [following,] in 1989 *Time* magazine's person of the year award [going] to 'The Endangered Earth'". (*ibidem*)

protagonist, Sophie, chooses a life with an American Indian over one with an Irish extractor, the former representing "a belief [system] that contain[s] much wisdom about nature and spirituality" (*ibidem*: xxii), while the latter characterizes a rapist's greed in stealing nature's resources. Regardless of how you look at her work, I feel, you will find a thread to reweave ever-new yarns of community, since Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's writing never shuts you off; on the contrary, she always leaves the doors open.

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