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Ancient Irish Stories for Social Criticism in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Postmodern Short Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's short fiction includes a juxtaposition of ancient tales and realist stories used for social criticism. This B.A. Thesis analyses the effects this combination of folklore and realism has by tracking down the narrative strategies the author follows in each short story, the original sources that are present in these texts, and the social topic the author is targeting. The complete analysis of these strategies reveals that each combination does indeed change the perspective one would have if only reading the individual realist story or ancient tale and that the impact produced when brought together is much more significant.

Keywords: Ní Dhuibhne, Short fiction, Ancient tales, Social criticism, Narrative strategies.

Las historias cortas de Éilís Ní Dhuibhne incluyen una yuxtaposición de leyendas antiguas e historias realistas usadas para la crítica social. Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado analiza los efectos de esta combinación de folklore y realismo a base de explorar las estrategias narrativas que utiliza la autora para cada historia corta, las fuentes originales presentes en los textos y el tema social que aborda la autora. El análisis completo de estas estrategias revela que cada combinación cambia de manera evidente la perspectiva que uno tendría únicamente leyendo de manera individual la historia corta o la leyenda antigua y que el impacto que producen cuando se juntan es mucho más significativo.

Palabras clave: Ní Dhuibhne, Historias cortas, Leyendas antiguas, Crítica social, Estrategias narrativas.

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Introduction

This B.A. Thesis deals with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's postmodernist short fiction and the reasons behind the inclusion of certain fantastic ancient tales and folkloric elements that aim to produce a specific effect when intertwined with the contemporary fiction they accompany. Its aim is to explore how Irish author Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (b. 1954), a folklorist as well as a renowned author of fiction, drama, books for young readers, and essays explores —by resorting to these ancient legends in some of her short fiction— the social circumstances that surrounded Ireland and the outgrowing discomfort that some people felt with mostly woman-related issues during the late twentieth century.

Folkloric legends are popular in diverse cultures and were passed from generation to generation. They are a topic of interest as such, but what interests us is Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's use of some of them as a tool for social criticism. The ancient legends that will be discussed in the paper fall into the category of migratory legends, which have been circulating in different locations of Europe —Ireland included— for a long period of time. Within these, Ní Dhuibhne makes a profuse use of shapeshifting (or transformation) legends, a subcategory within the migratory folklore.

Previous studies have approached this same area of research. "Stories like the Light of Stars" (2017) by Giovanna Tallone provides a general overview on the impact that these folkloric legends have on Ní Dhuibhne's fiction and, others, like Caitriona Moloney in "Re-Imagining Women's History in the Fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright, and Kate O'Riordan" (2007), analyse how Ní Dhuibhne's strategy of mixing folklore and fiction serve to vindicate these women from the past who were never heard.

This B.A. Thesis, however, intends to go beyond the analyses that have been previously done by further studying the pertinence of this folklore in the contemporary Irish society. We will see how each type of tale has been chosen to discuss a different issue and the manner in which Ní Dhuibhne plays with different and yet similar ways of inserting the folkloric in the contemporary.

The methodology that will be followed to achieve this is finding the original sources of the old legends the author has used and exploring the context and the events that could have influenced the author for writing these stories. We hold that what each legend represents, and the social context of its contemporary companion story, help to explain what Éilís Ní Dhuibhne tries to criticise in her works.

It is of major importance in this study to give individual attention to each narrative and that is why they are divided into three different groups that are characterised by the strategy used in every story. The first chapter focuses on "Midwife to the Fairies" and "The Mermaid Legend", in which the text of their corresponding ancient tales is intertwined with its postmodernist version. In the second chapter, the old tales in "Transformers in the Sky" and "The Pale Gold of Alaska" appear suddenly and unexpectedly in the narrative, as the realistic elements of the fiction are twisted by the introduction of the shapeshifting legend. The opposite device is used in the story analysed in the final chapter where the fantastic tale that is being presented in "The Search for the Lost Husband" is shockingly interrupted by an intrusion of realism at the end of the story.

This selection shows that Ní Dhuibhne's postmodernist fiction transmits a message that could not work as effectively without the particularities of the ancient stories that she has chosen, and proves that, in effect, the old legend is the main device to portray the problems that existed in a society which was rooted in conservatism and tradition. Furthermore, this Thesis achieves to demonstrate that the impact of the ancient tales had by themselves in society shaped it into believing in certain ideals and morals and they did not only portray the problematic issues in Irish society.

1

Fantastic and Realist Parallel Texts

"Midwife to the Fairies"

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's short story "Midwife to the Fairies" (1988) was written with the aim of transmitting to society significant issues existent in Ireland, which are infanticide and, along with it, the subject of abortion and the problems that may arise from living in a patriarchal society.

With the purpose of achieving this, Ní Dhuibhne makes use of a migratory legend that circulated around different European countries. In *A Dictionary of English Folklore,* a migratory legend is defined as "A legend which is found repeatedly at different places, having the same plot in every case but with place names and/or topographical details tailored to fit the individual site, […] it is assumed they have circulated for several centuries; some can be proved to have medieval or classical forerunners" (Simpson & Roud 239).

The legend that Ní Dhuibhne introduces in her own short story involves a midwife that is called to aid in the delivery of a child, but by accident she discovers the family are fairies; a male Fae blinds her, affecting the eye with which she sees them. This story is translated from the Irish by her from an old collection of fairy tales in a manuscript kept in the National Folklore Collection in University College Dublin. More examples of these legends of midwives and fairies can be found in Aarne and Thompson's and Christiansen's classifications. This tale is the one that gives name to Ní Dhuibhne's story "Midwife to the Fairies" —belonging to her 1988 collection of short stories *Blood and Water*— in which she combines passages from the oral legend and her own narration to comment on contemporary issues. To do this, Ní Dhuibhne inserts parts of her translation of the migratory legend in cursive while she tells a modern version of this same story. The result of this is a postmodernist retelling of the old tale —in which she combines and intertwines both— that serves the author to denounce infanticide in Ireland and raise awareness on the situation of women, as Ní Dhuibhne was born in a time where women were starting to protest and have a voice.

Ní Dhuibhne explains this perfectly in an interview for *The Canadian Journal for Irish Stories*:

> How do I use folklore in my writing? I allude to old stories. I counterpoint my own stories, set in the now, with oral stories, set in the past, or, more accurately, set in the never never or the always always. I feel, and hope, that this enhances my ordinary stories, gives them a depth and a mythic quality which, on their own, they would find it hard to achieve. It puts them in a large context – not only an Irish context, since the first thing one learns about oral narrative is its international nature. (St. Peter & Ní Dhuibhne 70)

Infanticide is a problem that has been present through all of Ireland's history. Unwanted and illegitimate children were a reality under which society lived. Unwanted children brought numerous consequences for the mothers that had them, such as societal and economic ones, which caused them to experience shame and fear for their and their child's wellbeing and, thus, infanticide was one of the most common felonies in Ireland. Acts such as the Infanticide Act of 1949, which followed the English example, stated that women who murdered their child would be sentenced for infanticide. Considerations such as the age of the baby and the state of mind of the mother were taken. In this act passed in 1949, the Government of Ireland states that:

> A woman shall be guilty of felony, namely, infanticide if—
> (a) by any wilful act or omission she causes the death of her child, being a child under the age of twelve months, and
> (b) the circumstances are such that, but for this section, the act or omission would have amounted to murder, and
> (c) at the time of the act or omission the balance of her mind was disturbed by reason of her not having fully recovered from the effect of giving birth to the child or by reason of the effect of lactation consequent upon the birth of the

> child and may for that offence be tried and punished as for manslaughter. (*Infanticide Act, 1949*)

However, infanticide still occurred in Ireland in 1988 and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne took inspiration from some notorious cases which were circulating in the news and newspapers when writing her short story. Two major occurrences agitated Irish population and were an enormous inspiration behind "Midwife to the Fairies". The Ann Lovett and Kerry Babies cases show how crude reality in Ireland was, and through the old migratory tale, Ní Dhuibhne tries to make Irish society be aware of the exceedingly great number of changes that were needed.

In 1984, the fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett gives birth in the cold outdoors and both she and her baby die in the process of her giving birth. Again, this same year, Joanne Hayes is blamed for the death of a baby found buried and stabbed twenty-eight times in the beach. Joanne Hayes is later arrested and questioned, as she herself had buried her own baby —who she says was stillborn— in her family farm. She was sent from jail to a psychiatric hospital until she convinced the police to find the body of her own baby. When this happened, the police insisted that both babies were hers and that 'heteropaternal superfecundation' was the best explanation for this. After an awful amount of questioning, it was found that Joanne was not the mother of Baby John —the name that was given to the baby found stabbed and dead in the beach. Nevertheless, the hell that Joanne experienced and the way she was treated and blamed for a crime she did not commit stirred Irish population, who stood by Hayes. Moreover, the person who was responsible for Baby John's death was never found.

Both these cases demonstrate how Irish society treated women and how hard it was for women to survive this type of extreme situation. Not only that, but men were never suspected or questioned when such cases of infanticide happened. Ní Dhuibhne transforms this reality into fiction and into a protest in her short story.

"Midwife to the Fairies" is about a midwife that gets involved in the birth of an illegitimate child. The protagonist of the story, called Mary, knows from the moment the baby is born what it will face and that things will not end well for it. However, Mary is pressed by her husband and, later, by the family of the baby, to not tell anything about what she has witnessed when helping with the delivery of the baby.

This situation was common in a society where adultery was not illegal, but abortion was. Women in Ireland had few to no rights, and they were the ones to blame in all circumstances.

The baby in Ní Dhuibhne's story is found death, as well as Ann Lovett's and the Kerry babies were. This makes possible for the author to use reality to create fiction where she shows the way in which society treated women. Ann Lovett and Joanne Hayes were neglected and afraid of their pregnancy, feeling forced to give birth alone, which led them to brutal consequences. Sarah —the young girl that gives birth in Ní Dhuibhne's story— is ignored by all the people in her house, which can be seen through Mary's perspective as she narrates that "She was lying on the bed, on her own" (1988, 30). Family rejection and shame were two of the consequences of giving birth to unwanted children. When the baby is born, even though Mary knows that this will not happen, she suggests and insists that "By right she should be in an incubator" (31) in a hospital because of her fragile state. Inevitably, days later the baby is found dead, and the image of Sarah is circulating the newspapers.

The death of the baby in Ní Dhuibhne's story is considered a great scandal by everyone, as it appears in all the newspapers. Likewise, the Kerry Babies and Lovett's cases were seen as outrageous wrongdoings and circulated in the news. As Joanne Hayes was questioned by the police for a long time, the same thing happens with Ní Dhuibhne's character, who is being examined for a possible case of infanticide.

In both cases, the pregnancy of the girl is hidden, and they are not helped. The protagonist of "Midwife to the Fairies" shows willingness to go and testify, but her husband stops her. In the old tale, the Fae blinds the midwife for seeing what she is not supposed to see, which in Ní Dhuibhne's retelling is presented by the threats she receives if she speaks, because she has also seen more than she should have. When cases such as these ones happened, people did not dare get involved in them, for what the consequences might be. Apart from that, Mary's husband does not feel any sympathy for her or the dead baby and mother, and even blames her for going to the Gardaí and for her being threatened by Sean, the man that takes her to the baby. With this example, Ní Dhuibhne shows how deeply sexism was rooted in Irish society, as well as that it was ruled by a patriarchal society.

The author of “Midwife to the Fairies” has chosen this legend to protest against the little importance that was given to these types of situations, and by rewriting the old tale into a contemporary short story —by turning the blind eye inflicted by the fairies on the midwife in the original tale into the blindness of a whole society—, she intends to facilitate people’s understanding of these subjects. Ní Dhuibhne uses the migratory legend because when the midwife is blinded by the Fae, she cannot see their wrongdoings anymore. This magical element provides the midwife with an excuse for not doing anything regarding the events that she has witnessed. In “Midwife to the Fairies”, Mary only decides to act when the baby is dead and neither her nor the others care about the mother and the personal circumstances that had driven her to act in this way.

However, there are many other instances in which Éilís Ní Dhuibhne presents contemporary issues in this story, and those do not deal exclusively with infanticide.

The women of Ireland —for instance, cases such as Joanne Hayes and Ann Lovett— and the girl in “Midwife to the Fairies”, Sarah, cannot opt for an abortion, as it was illegal until 2018, when the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act was passed. This fact, along with many others —such as the consequences women faced— made infanticide more possible. In any way, cases of infanticide were always connected to women. Despite of this, through her protagonist, Ní Dhuibhne shows how women truly understood what was happening but did not give those issues the importance they deserved, as the Irish society did not get involved, cared or helped any of the women suffering from these kinds of things. By the end of “Midwife to the Fairies”, Mary contemplates the possibilities the baby might have had to survive, as she thinks “She may have had a chance, in intensive care. But who am I to judge?” (34). However, Mary is not disturbed for what might happen to the mother, as she is more worried about what would have happened to herself if she went to testify and is easily relieved when the priest tells her that she did her best and that God ‘“does not ask of us to put our lives in danger”’ (34).

Moreover, Mary only feels responsible and bound to assist the mother as that is her duty. As she says, “My mother did it before me and her mother before her, and they never let anyone down” (28), which shows how rooted midwifery was in Irish society and directly relates the short story to the old legend, where this also happened. In fact, Mary’s concern is

uniquely directed to the wellbeing of the baby and not of the mother; letting a child die would be morally wrong; letting the mother be sentenced for the death of the baby was seen as correct, because she had to accept the repercussions that came with being a single mother.

The reason why Éilís Ní Dhuibhne used this specific migratory tale to present this topic can be linked with the traditions and spiritual beliefs that existed when these legends circulated. In Irish Folklore, fairies were the souls of children that were not baptised. The popular belief was that children who were unbaptised would go to what they called the 'Otherworld', which was, evidently, not heaven. This meant that the mother would not be received by their baptised children in 'heaven' either. Moreover, in these legends the protagonist is always a woman who kills the child, was seen as evil, and represented the sinful women in Irish society. Considering this, women who had illegitimate children were condemned as not being 'virtuous females', a much needed and required characteristic in Ireland.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's "Midwife to the Fairies" is a story that perfectly represents how delicate a subject this was and how little could be done for women and their children in Ireland, a country deeply rooted in Catholicism and conservatism. The way in which women were treated was completely ignored by a society shaped in that particular way. The author of this short story, by combining folkloric legend, contemporary fiction, and reality, manages to expose her view on tradition and sexism from a feminist perspective, as well as manifest her desire for change in a society that is so strictly formed.

"The Mermaid Legend"

"The Mermaid Legend" (1991) is a short story that belongs to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's collection *Eating Women is Not Recommended* and contains motifs of shapeshifting folklore that she uses to deal with different controversial topics. In "The Mermaid Legend", Ní Dhuibhne introduces the supernatural element of the mermaid in the same way she does in "Midwife to the Fairies", that is, inserting the old story in cursive in between the contemporary fictitious one that she herself creates as a type of retelling.

This old tale explains how mermaids were caught when fishermen stole their cloaks, because they could not go back to the sea without them, and then they were forced to marry them and have children. Typically, the mermaid would find her cloak and go back to the sea, only returning to the fisherman's home secretly to braid her children's hair. As Bo Almqvist explains in "Of Mermaids and Marriages", these legends were very popular in Ireland. Many records of these old tales are preserved. For instance, Almqvist mentions one written in English that can be found in The School's Collection of Folklore, collected at Glenbeigh school, Kerry (218).

With the plot of these legends, Ní Dhuibhne is inspired to create her own postmodernist retelling, in which she presents an English woman who is seduced in a pub by an Irishman, gets married, and becomes a mother of two girls. However, the protagonist in Ní Dhuibhne's short story is not a woman who is willing to suffer from an unhappy marriage and life. On the contrary, the female protagonist offers a divorce —which her husband rejects— to escape from her current life.

In this story, the author intends to address mainly issues such as divorce and the cost of divorce, which is renouncing to your own children. Also, as it is common in Ní Dhuibhne's stories, she discusses the relationships and differences between men and women, and the situation of Ireland at the time and, in the specific case of this story, the differences between the English and the Irish people.

Divorce was not legal in Ireland until some years after she wrote the short story, and it only became legal in 1995 with the Family Law (Divorce) Act. This is present in Ní Dhuibhne's "The Mermaid Legend", whose protagonist speaks about the impossibility of getting a divorce: "No divorce across the water, of course, and Michael wouldn't have heard of it anyway. When I mentioned the word 'legal separation' he nearly hit the roof" (1991, 173). 'Legal separation' was possible in Ireland at the time since the enactment of the Judicial Separation and Family Law Reform Act of 1989. However, granting this Act was complicated and circumstances such as why the couple has decided to separate, custody of children and arrangement of properties were considered. Also, 'judicial separation' only allows a couple to live separately, but the marriage stays intact. There were many reasons for people to be against divorce and separation:

> The reasons for defeat have been much debated. One key issue, particularly important to farming families, was family property. Moreover, separation procedures were not yet fully in place, and wives remained economically vulnerable in the event of marriage break-down. (Hill 887)

This is significant because in both the short story and in the old legend, the protagonists opt to run away and leave their children with their father. Morally, this act was inadequate because it did not follow the Irish standards for women, in which they were expected to be wives and mothers. Furthermore, the Catholic church condemned those mothers who did not stick to these standards and considered them evil in a society rooted in Catholicism. We see that in the descriptions Ní Dhuibhne gives of the relationship between the (English) mother and her (Irish) mother-in-law. Both characters do not like each other because of the differences in their mentalities. As an Irishwoman, the mother-in-law expects certain behaviors of her daughter-in-law, such as going to church. Moreover, the protagonist is annoyed at her because she says that she is "rattling her rosary beads at me, practically every time she saw me" (1991, 171). Things like these make the relationship between both women a hard one, because they do not accept the mindset of the other one.

"The Mermaid Legend" and the old legend, that Ní Dhuibhne partially interpolates with her own story, have many features in common, but they are also characterized for their differences. Ní Dhuibhne changes the female protagonist in her story from a submissive mermaid who is forced to obey her husband until she finds her cloak, to an Englishwoman who is not as 'docile' as the mermaid. The protagonist's way of speaking is not as formal as that of the mermaid in Ní Dhuibhne's translation of the old legend, but more colloquial and unaccepted by society. Examples of this are all over the text: "I keep looking at the damn thing" (169), "Tickle my ass with a feather" (169), "his bloody old b. of a mother" (171).

The juxtaposition of these two narratives —the old legend and Ní Dhuibhne's short story— serves the author to show how both female characters can be seen and interpreted by the reader. In the old tale, it is known for a fact that the mermaid cannot return to the sea without her cloak, which forces her to live with the fisherman. However, in the postmodernist

retelling of this legend, the protagonist feels forced to marry the Irishman, even though she knows from the beginning that she does not want to do this: “Even while I was standing on the bloody red and white altar, I could see me leaving at the end” (171). In addition to this, she does not feel as if she belongs or fits in her husband’s world, because she is from The Potteries (England) and he is from Spiddal, a village in Connacht —where Irish is still spoken, which makes it even harder for the female protagonist. At the end, she ends up leaving her husband and her two children in the middle of the night and goes back to England. As mentioned before, divorce was not legalized in Ireland at the time. Even if it were possible in England, the protagonist indicates that her husband would have never accepted it. Nevertheless, as Mary Hederman explains in “Irish Women and Irish Law”:

> Needless to say in the reverse situation, where it is the wife who deserts and who obtains the English Divorce, she is regarded in Irish Law as still married to her “first” husband and although she may remarry and have children her property may on her death be liable to the claim of the first husband on the basis of his right as the spouse to a proportion of her estate. (57)

If an Englishwoman married to an Irishman asked for a divorce in England, the divorce would not be valid in Ireland. The protagonist in Ní Dhuibhne’s story explains that she will have to separate in the ‘old Irish way’, which is running away in the middle of the night. Furthermore, she worries about being able to call or see her children and believes not even Irish people would prevent a mother from that right: “There is such thing as access, yes sirree, there is. Even in Ireland, that’s legal. It must be. A mother can’t be kept from her children.” (174). However, even if the protagonist in this retelling of the old legend shows a clear concern for leaving her children and not being able to see them again, a society shaped by a mentality such as the Irish one would have judged this type of woman for deserting her children and acting so selfishly. In the old tale, there is a reason why the mermaid cannot take her children with her, which is that she lives in the sea. In Ní Dhuibhne’s story, the mother will not be able to take them with her because, when situations as these ones happened, the mother was

usually affected economically and would not be able to maintain her children: “I’ll have lost me job and disgraced myself into the bargain.” (174).

By making use of the old legend, the author succeeds in making the deserting mother’s decisions easier to grasp. The mermaid as a character was easier to sympathize with because, in the legend, she was completely forced to stay without possibility of returning home without her cloak; once she gets her cloak back, she returns to the sea; she is not seen as a bad, evil mother because she comes many nights to comb her daughters’ hair, which means she has not abandoned them. In the contemporary story, the protagonist will call her daughters every night, which is how Ní Dhuibhne brings together both stories. Ní Dhuibhne’s protagonist would not have been seen in a good light by the Irish society without the old legend underlying and sharing the page with her story.

To connect the old legend and her retelling, she not only includes the old legend in cursive but uses a great number of symbols throughout the whole text that connect the two protagonists through motifs related to water and the sea. Ní Dhuibhne’s protagonist compares herself to a goldfish and says she’s a “sea girl” herself (175), for instance. This helps relate the two protagonists which, given the differences because of the period in which both stories were composed, have a common lifestyle and an unwanted and forced relationship.

By including the old tale in her narrative, Ní Dhuibhne presents an issue that was common at the time and denounces the impossibility of getting a divorce in Ireland and the issues that this causes. It is important to note that, in this short story, the author also makes visible how women’s rights and the mentality of people in England were much more advanced than in Ireland, as they could get divorced; the protagonist shows clear disgust about the way in which women live in Ireland —“And the women, except for the old dears with no kids anymore, never going to the pub at all” (172)— and about men not helping either: “Late in the pub, never doing a hand’s turn in the house, the usual” (172).

“The Mermaid Legend” is one of Ní Dhuibhne’s stories that discuss a subject that was of great importance in her time and that people found controversial in many ways, which was the much-needed legalization of divorce. By having a female protagonist from England and an Irishman, she shows how England’s advances are positive and that Ireland might need them as well. Using the mermaid as a symbol to represent mothers who wanted to leave is a

great way in which the author shows that the situation of women was too harsh and that they were not the villains in these situations.

2

A Shapeshifting Twist to Realist Tales

"Transformers in the Sky"

"Transformers in the Sky" (1991) is a short story belonging to *Eating Women is not Recommended* that explores the lifestyle of Irish women in the late twentieth century. With this story, the author aims to present the situation of these women and how their lifestyle was not satisfying, but rather monotonous and tiresome.

The twentieth century brought a great number of changes (economic, political, social, etc.) in the lifestyle of Irish society. These changes affected women, whose situation was improved to some point. Firstly, it is important to note that by the end of the nineteenth century, certain laws were enacted, and these contributed positively to the development of women's situation. The Poor Law Guardian Act (1896) established that women could participate in administrative aspects of indoor relief and the Local Government Act (1896) established that women would be accepted as candidates for election in their locality's council. With this, women had more opportunities of expanding their activities and doing more than housework. However, as Irish society always developed slowly, almost a century later, working in the house was still the main activity for women who came from modest backgrounds and did not possess the advantages of those of the higher classes. These adult women oversaw the cleaning, cooking, taking care of their kids, and other daily-life maintenance activities. As it is stated in *A New History of Ireland* by Jacqueline R. Hill: "Girls were encouraged to think in terms of a relatively short period of gainful employment, followed by marriage and responsibilities for home care and child rearing" (881). Many women felt the need to escape from these life conditions and opted for emigration to other countries.

Those who stayed benefited from the efforts of organizations like the Irish Housewives Association, founded in 1942 and active until 1992. This association spoke out against the injustices against women. Hilda Tweedy's (one of the founding members of the association) papers conserved in the National Archives explain that: "The Irish Housewives

Association (IHA) was formed in 1942, with the objective of gaining recognition for the right of housewives to play an active part in all spheres of planning for the community" (*Hilda Tweedy Papers*, 2). However, associations such as this one —and other movements and groups as The Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM) and Irish Women United (IWU)— still considered the main role of women to be that of a mother and wife, which meant that they would not be able to achieve any other interest they might have apart from these ones. Moreover, the woman as a mother figure is in keeping with Ireland's traditional personification as a woman and a mother.

As we can see, even if women were given many new advantages in a society embedded in conservatism, they still had the responsibility of taking care of their families and lived a stressful and joyless life, which is perfectly described in Ní Dhuibhne's short story "Transformers in the Sky". In this realist narrative, we see a woman tired of her lifestyle that desperately desires to escape from her current reality. To portray this, Ní Dhuibhne —as she does in many of her stories— resorts to an old legend known as 'The Old Woman as Hare'. This old Irish legend is classified into the category of shapeshifting legends within the larger category of migratory legends and tells the story of an old woman who shapeshifts into a hare to steal milk from the farmers' cows. The farmer finds the hare and tries to hunt it down, eventually shooting the animal, which disappears, and he finds instead a hurt woman lying in bed. A great example of this old legend can be found written by William Butler Yeats's version that goes by the name of "The Witch Hare", collected in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (212). Also, in Almqvist's *Crossing the Border*, this legend is classified with the number 3056 —as Almqvist explains that Christiansen does not give a proper classification to it and that versions and translations of it can be found in "O Duilearga 1948, 437 (= 1981, 399-400); Wall 1977, 4; 0 Cathain 1985, 77-8; Ni Dhuibhne, forthcoming" (269).

The old legend is subtly introduced at the end of the story —and not with full quotations in cursive as in "Midwife to the Fairies" or "The Mermaid Legend"— when the protagonist imagines how she shapeshifts into a hare: "I'm slowly transforming into some sort of animal. A brown animal, furry. It's a rabbit. No. A hare. I've turned into a hare, in my own kitchen" (148). This magical element that suddenly disrupts the realism of the

postmodernist story serves the author to show how deeply her protagonist wishes to escape from her reality and be freed from her duties.

'The Old Woman as Hare' is a perfect fit for Ní Dhuibhne's short story. As she herself says in "'The Old Woman as Hare': Structure and Meaning in an Irish Legend" (1993), the legend and the hare itself reflect many different things:

> The legend is a useful vehicle for feelings of resentment directed at people of a minority religion or social group. As is general in witch-hunting syndromes, the resentment focuses on the most vulnerable and also most despised representative of the minority group, the solitary, usually old, woman. (79)

The 'minority group' is, in this story, that of the protagonist herself, who does not fit in with the other middleclass women. At the beginning of the story we find her going to a parents committee that she does not want to attend. We know that she would rather stay home, because she says that "she didn't feel like leaving" her son (143). However, going to the committee is a responsibility that she has —women having been shaped by a society that put them in charge of many things they had not asked for themselves.

While the protagonist narrates the story, a class distinction between the women in the committee is clearly made. Characters such as Mrs. Fitzpatrick show that women had different positions in their jobs —she is a secretary; others are Kay Brown, who is a writer from the upper classes, or Mrs. Murphy, a woman from the lowest classes. The protagonist is annoyed by everything Kay Brown says. She gets frustrated when she suggests buying drying machines for the school and Kay Brown rejects her idea, without considering the financial status of the protagonist or the other women present in the room. However, it seems that the protagonist's negative behaviour towards the world comes from her situation at home. She must take care of her family and her husband makes this even more difficult because he is spending all their money on Coca Colas because he is recovering from alcoholism.

The unbearable duties that women were forced to face as mothers, and wives, and the expectations that society had raised for these women, explain why the protagonist would

desire to be free from these duties and why the author introduces the old legend to help the woman of her story disassociate. As Ní Dhuibhne herself explains in the above mentioned article: "Transformed to a wild animal, the woman has a freedom she would not possess in her own shape" (79). Her protagonist goes directly home from the meeting and shape-shifts into a hare in her imagination, escaping her home through the window. Once the narrator has shape-shifted into this animal, she enters a state of freedom: "I take a flying leap and I'm out through the window, out in the garden. Out of sight" (149). She is relieved from all her duties and responsibilities as a woman.

In the old tale, the woman is safe when she is in an interior —where women were considered to belong. Ní Dhuibhne explains that "Once inside, she can no longer be injured, because she is no longer wild but domesticated" (79). Obviously, in the old legend women belonged inside, where they were safe, as these old stories were usually told by men. Indeed, in Ní Dhuibhne's own story the woman is safe once she is "out of sight" (148). The parallelisms between the old story and this retelling are evident: in this newest version, the protagonist is haunted by all the duties she has for being a woman just as in the old tale the hare is hunted by a farmer for stealing his milk; both stories have the protagonist run home injured —in the old tale she is shot, in this new version she is psychologically drained, tired, and hurt, desperate for escaping, but unable to.

"Transformers in the Sky" represents, with the help of the old legend of the 'Old Woman as Hare', the life of a middleclass woman who is tired of her relentless routine and dull and monotonous life, to a point where she profoundly desires an escape from that life and unwanted reality that she is trapped in. Author Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, through unexpectedly closing the realist short by resorting to the old legend, shows how, even if society developed and the situation of women slightly changed for the better, their main occupation was taking care of family and home, which generated many negative and stressful feelings.

"The Pale Gold of Alaska"

"The Pale Gold of Alaska" is a short story that belongs to the collection *The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Stories* (2000). This narrative introduces the mythological creature of the

selkie, that is part of the shapeshifting folklore —although we do not see a transformation as such, and the elements that shape this type of migratory legend.

Selkies are popularly found in Irish and Scottish mythology and legends. The selkies are half-human, half-seals that could take their sealskin off to wander around human lands. In the article "Water-Beings in Shetlandic Folk-Lore, as Remembered by Shetlanders in British Columbia", Teit refers to the selkies as:

> the selki-folk; […] some people say […] that they could assume seal-form as well as fish-form when travelling in the sea, or that they could more frequently assume the shape of a seal than that of a fish. In both cases real transformations were not involved, but mere coverings were adjusted to enable them to roam the seas. (190)

Stories of these mythological creatures are not easily found, as the selkies and the mermaids are confused and the legends about both seem to be similar. The legend of the selkie usually follows a plot in which a fisherman finds a selkie's sealskin and takes it with him, which forces the selkie to marry him. They have children and, one day, the selkie finds her sealskin and returns to the sea. Legends about mermaids followed this same storyline, as we have seen in "The Mermaid Legend".

Selkies are not found as such in Aarne and Thompson's or Christiansen's classification. David Thomson collects many stories about the sea-folk and the selkies in his book *The People of the Sea: Celtic Tales of the Seal-Folk* (2001). In "Of Mermaids and Marriages" (1990), Bo Almqvist clarifies that selkies are just an Irish version of the global legend of the mermaid: "seal maidens […] legend type is one of those most popular in Irish tradition" (4).

The figure of the selkie and the legends about them served author Éilís Ní Dhuibhne to portray the stereotyped figure of the madwoman in "The Pale Gold of Alaska". The character of the madwoman has been written since the nineteenth century in many novels that can be compared to Ní Dhuibhne's story. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) introduced Bertha as the madwoman and Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) in the twentieth century to give a voice to this type of character, whose insanity has a more profound meaning

that being out of her mind. Sophie, in Ní Dhuibhne's narrative, is also characterized as a madwoman, especially at the end of the story:

> She walked around the shanty town, wrapped in her sealskin coat, chanting these incantations, without cease. […] It was generally thought among the Irishmen, pious or secular, who were hitting gold with Ned, that Sophie's ordeal in Missoula at the hands of the Indians had affected her brain, and that she was not quite right in the head. (2000, 34)

There are more reasons why Ní Dhuibhne would connect her main character to the trope of the selkie. In "The Pale Gold of Alaska" the author explores, as in many of her other short stories, the relationship between men and women and the patriarchal society. In "Supernatural Beings in the Far North: Folklore, Folk Belief, and The Selkie", Nancy Cassell McEntire makes this association:

> On the level of gender relations, selkie stories provide a context for considering issues of balance of power between men and women. The male 'keeps' the female by claiming a part of her and keeping it hidden from her. The sealskin, so much a part of the woman's first identity, is taken away from her. As long as it belongs to the man who has found her, she must allow that man to have the position of power. (135)

If McEntire's description of the use of selkie stories is considered, "The Pale Gold of Alaska" shows this 'balance of power' through the relationship between Sophie and her husband Ned. The moment in which they meet —in the middle of the ocean— is directly linked to how mermaids and fishermen met. Furthermore, as in the mermaid legends, their relationship is based on man's authority with the woman in a submissive state. He is the one to decide many things that deal with not only his but her life and, in numerous instances, he shows himself as controlling and aggressive. Eventually, Sophie loses her trust in him: "He pulled off all her clothes, the first time he had ever done this. […] Then he raised his hand and hit her." (11); "Sophie was unsure. Now that she knew Ned better, going off with him alone, into the

wilderness as it were, seemed more dangerous than it had when she first met him." (12). Also, the author exhibits that these acts of abuse against women were completely normalized in their society and that no one did anything to stop them: "She heard women shouting and screaming sometimes, on Sunday nights, she saw black eyes and bruises, sad shamed faces, which were not to be commented upon" (12). The society surrounding the characters is mainly an Irish one living in the United States, which is why when cases of abuse happened people did not get concerned or disturbed.

Sophie's life takes a turn when they move to Montana. Ned spends many hours working and obsessing over gold, which leads Sophie to live a more independent life in which she is not completely controlled by her husband. This moment of her newfound 'freedom' is symbolised by the coat made of sealskin he gives her —evocative of the sealskin that the fishermen steal from the selkies— and she does not feel the same anymore when wearing it: "She did not feel human at all, but part of the huge animal world which surrounded her now on all sides, which was with her inside and outside her cabin" (16). During the whole story there is constant mention to watery imagery —travelling the ocean, storms, shells, rivers, seals— and to nature to express Sophie's sense of freedom when she is surrounded by these elements.

"The Pale Gold of Alaska" is a short story that does not only deal with Sophie's secluded life controlled by her husband, but about self-discovery through the wilderness, which symbolises her liberation. Ní Dhuibhne brings the colonisation of the Indians and the colonies as such to her narrative for the protagonist to have something to be compared to. Throughout the short story, the reader realises, along with Sophie, that she feels most free and content in the wilderness, which is why she establishes a close relationship with one of the Indians. She is surprised to see that they are not the brutes that people have portrayed them to be: "Everything she assumed about the Indians was turning out to be wrong" (31). She can feel identified with the treatment they are receiving at the hands of the white men — both Sophie and the Indians suffer from violence and are abused for what they are— but also she feels connected to them because of her link with nature and the animals.

At the end of the story, Sophie aims to escape with her Indian lover because he has found that her relationship with him is different from her relationship with Ned. The reasons

for these feelings (and the ensuing complications) are better explained in “Supernatural Beings in the Far North: Folklore, Folk Belief, and The Selkie”:

> If marriage turns sour, women may wish for a return to their former ‘self’, just as the selkie longs for the sea, but such a change, so vital and inevitable in the selkie folktale, is complicated in real life. The desire for escape from marital bonds has especially poignant implications for women who are caught in abusive relationships and feel powerless to leave them. (McEntire 135)

Considering this, it makes sense that Ní Dhuibhne subtly introduces the selkie trope to represent the state in which many Irish women lived —a wild being turned into a domesticated woman forced to stick to her role as a good and submissive wife.

3

A Realist Twist to a Fantastic Tale

"The Search for the Lost Husband"

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's collection *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* (1997) is a compilation of thirteen postmodernist stories that deal with the daily life of and relationships between men and women and fourteen instalments of a short story titled "The Search for the Lost Husband" introduced in-between the other ones. Each instalment in Ní Dhuibhne's retelling of an ancient tale in "The Search for the Lost Husband" focuses on one of the original legend's events —either 'a year', the loss of each of the protagonist's three children, and each day she spends trying to find the little white goat to save him from his curse.

"The Search for the Lost Husband" is a story inspired by the old folk tale of 'The Story of the Little White Goat', which can be found translated in English by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume IV: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions* (1226). This folk tale is about a cursed man who transforms into a goat during the day. A young girl falls in love with him, but she must face numerous challenges to demonstrate her love: she cannot cry if something bad happens to her children, she must go after the little white goat because he flees, she must free him from his curse to be with him.

In Ní Dhuibhne's 1997 version, the story follows an almost identical plot, and it is not adjusted to fit the characters and elements into the twentieth century. However, the end is altered, as the young girl rebels and decides that she "is tired of all this fairytale stuff" (262) and leaves the man she has been chasing for a young farmer who promises her stability and a future. The protagonist realises that all the adventure she has gone through to be with the little white goat is something that does not make her happy and that she does not desire. By changing the ending, the author is trying to show that there are many issues to be considered about the little white goat and his behaviour towards the young girl who is in love with him. The turn of events that change the original path of the legend —introduced when the protagonist says to the little white goat "I don't think I want to" in reply to his proposal

to "get married, and live happily ever after" (261)— lead the reader into reconsidering the meaning of the story and reading it with a new feminist lens.

With this story, the author aims to address the way in which marriage and love are idealized and perceived by women and the way in which relationships between women and men work. This is achieved not only by changing the original legend, but also with the help of the other realist short stories that comprise the book *The Inland Ice* itself. The characters are authoritative men, successful and intelligent women, who get involved in different situations related to love. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne does not only comment about marriage, but also on themes such as abuse, rape, manipulation, gender-assigned roles, infidelity, beauty standards, etc. Stories like "Gweedore Girl", "Love, Hate and Friendship" or "Lili Marlene" explore the subject of sexism. Men are manipulative, touch the women without consent and have many more advantages for being male. Other stories, like "Hot Earth", show how men undervalue intelligent women, as James does to Bernadette when saying: "There are terrible gaps in your education […] Sometimes you'd be well advised to keep your mouth shut" (108); and how women were taught to look for men's approval, as we can see in "Swiss Cheese", where the protagonist is worried about her appearance when meeting her lover:

> …she doesn't need to wear make-up. […] except when she's meeting Paddy. […] It makes her feel tougher and more female than before. Maybe that is why she uses cosmetics for Paddy —not only to embrace her appearance, but to aid her in battle. (141)

Considering this, it is curious that, as opposed to the other stories in which she introduces old legends to aid herself in transmitting a certain message for her contemporary readers, in the case of *The Inland Ice and Other Stories*, Ní Dhuibhne uses the other short stories that comprise the book to demonstrate that folk tales about love should not be idealized as they are. Because the other stories display situations that are realistic, they are a helpful tool to dismantle the misperception that exists when analysing tales.

'The Story of the Little White Goat' is a legend that starts from different presumptions from those on Ní Dhuibhne's time —sexism and abusive relationships were not perceived as

they are now. The fact that the protagonist faces so many challenges to have her beloved one is a feature that is well-seen in tales, but the female protagonist of Ní Dhuibhne's story changes this:

> You have led me a merry dance, up hill and down dale, and through briars and brambles and bracken and thorns, through rivers and lakes and ditches and puddles, through thick and through thin and in and out. And I think I have had enough of you. (261)

Choosing this tale instead of any other legend also might contain a specific symbolism, as Susan Sellers explains in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*:

> I am also aware of the ongoing tendency to 'gender' the two, and the hierarchy which the equation of myth with masculinity and fairy with femininity produces. […] I see the way they encapsulate fairy tale's ability to transport us beyond the confusions of our lives into a realm where destiny is clear, and where we benefit by example, as intrinsic to the genre's power. For me the tensions between the 'anything can happen' promise of the magic that we will transgress all the rules and the inexorability of the story as its sequence of events is played out are enabling, because they echo the complicated patterns of our own desire to dare and to need to conform. (16)

Once this is put into consideration, it becomes clear that these tales were meant to be told to women to shape their ideals and ideas of how love and life should be. Most tales are characterised by ladies who need to be rescued, who are unable to do things by themselves and who, to obtain love, must go through sacrifice, adventure, and danger.

Moreover, Ní Dhuibhne's feminist retelling of 'The Story of the Little White Goat' reveals a manipulative man and not a 'prince charming' that saves the poor and desperate maid. Through this story, the reader sees that he takes her children away because she does not obey his order to not cry. In addition to this, once she is trying to get together with him,

he sends her to different places to sleep in which she is treated greatly. She is also given gifts in those places where she spends the nights. As a result, these little details are the way in which the author presents that abusive relationships are usually counterparted with nuances of affection and love that retain the other person. Furthermore, these gifts that are given to her change her appearance —the golden hair, the beautiful dress—, turning her into a 'princess', which is directed to the high beauty standards women are expected to follow.

On the other side, we see that, on her journey, 'the little white goat' is constantly telling her that she should leave him and go back to her home. This would make people consider the protagonist the one to blame for going through 'water and fire' for him and, even more, it is his way of convincing her that he has no fault and should not be blamed. However, at the end of the tale, this misperception is dismantled when the young girl confronts him and replies to his claim that it was her choice to behave like that —"But you love me! You can't live without me! You've proved it by your relentless hunting down of me, your dauntless passion!" (261)— by throwing the same argument back on him: "But you were the one who came to my doorstep, day after day, fawning all over me until I fell in love with you. And as soon as that happened, off you went!" (261).

These changes that Ní Dhuibhne has introduced at the end of her retelling are of great importance to see that women have always been persuaded into not seeing male manipulation and control. In this case, the author substitutes the quest for true passionate love for one in which the protagonist finds herself and what she truly desires and wishes. Once she sees that all the journey to earn the love and affection of the 'little white goat' had made her suffer and that she is not interested in pursuing and fighting for this type of love anymore, she decides that she is going to leave him, take her children with her and go back to her parents. The girl in this retelling decides to change her 'destiny' and that the kind of love she desires is a completely different one.

As Rowe states in *Feminism and Fairy Tales* (1978) the "close relationship between fantasy and reality […] influence[s] so significantly female expectations of their role in patriarchal cultures" (222). Feminist postmodernist authors try to eliminate the models created by this patriarchal society that Rowe talks about: "as long as modern women continue

to tailor their aspirations and capabilities to conform to romantic paradigms, they will live with deceptions, disillusionments and/or ambivalences" (222).

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's retelling of 'The Story of the Little White Goat' is meant to help these 'modern women' to be aware of the physical and psychological abuse they could suffer in their daily life because of these paradigms they were not taught to see as problematic. The other short stories that conform *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* also represent abusive relationships that support the topics hinted at in "The Search for the Lost Husband". They also guide women to see that they should not depend on relationships to be happy and successful, and that the marriages and love stories that are shown in fiction are not realistic. Furthermore, by letting her protagonist in the retelling decide and transform her beliefs in the last moment, Ní Dhuibhne shows that it is not too late to change the perception women have of a 'perfect relationships'.

Conclusions

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's short fiction is characterised by its originality, which she has achieved by her juxtaposition of postmodernist stories and ancient tales. The contrast of these texts causes a great impact on those who read the final product because together they unveil problematic social features in a more profound manner.

As stated in the Introduction, this Thesis aimed to analyse each selected story and demonstrate that they aim at changing the perspective of Irish society on those same social issues. The ancient tales have traditionally influenced people into shaping their ideas and beliefs. By inserting each specific tale in her own fiction, Ní Dhuibhne can deconstruct the original story and provide a new modern version that helps the Irish society progress into a less conservative one.

Ní Dhuibhne's short fiction and the strategies she uses in her narratives have been a topic of discussion before, but the original sources of the tales she chooses and the particularities of these as tools for social criticism have not been previously commented on. By commenting on each separate short story thoroughly, this Thesis' aim to demonstrate that every story has its singularities and is used for determinate purposes is achieved.

Formally, we can conclude that Ní Dhuibhne uses two different methods: placing the ancient and the modern text simultaneously on the same page, and disrupting a modern story or a traditional story with the intrusion, respectively, of folklore or modernity.

Contentwise, when the stories coexist together, the traditional perception of the legend is dismantled and brought to shed light on harsh situations such as infanticide ("Midwife to the Fairies") or the impossibility of getting a divorce ("The Mermaid Legend"). In other stories, in which the strategy is changed, Ní Dhuibhne modifies the original path the story would follow by abruptly interrupting it either with the legend or with a realist touch, again shedding light on issues like the gender-assigned roles ("Transformers in the Sky" and "The Search for the Lost Husband") or domestic violence ("The Pale Gold of Alaska"). The portrayal of the Irish society and their treatment of women by introducing mythological and fantastic creatures gives women a voice and a story in which they can be seen as the victims of a patriarchal system.

The original legends, which are not completely inserted in some of Ní Dhuibhne's stories, are also a subject of consideration in this Thesis. Without turning to the sources of these tales, the hypothesis with which this Thesis began would have failed. My final reflection is that the significance of ancient legends is further proved in this study, since, either on their own or used for social criticism —as it is done in Ní Dhuibhne's work— they influence the way in which people apprehend society.

The old legends that are introduced in these stories are not the only ones present in the writer's oeuvre. It would be interesting to continue this line of work in the future by finding all the other folkloric elements that are present in her other stories and novels and comparing the strategies with the ones already commented on, to see if those elements are used and work as effectively for social criticism.

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