



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

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**An Ecocritical Analysis of Grace Wells’s *The Church of the Love of the World*.**

**"*Tuath* significa persoas, significa lugar". Unha Análise Ecocrítica do Poemario de Grace Wells *The Church of the Love of the World*.**

**"*Tuath* significa personas, significa lugar". Un Análisis Ecocrítico del Poemario de Grace Wells *The Church of the Love of the World***

M<sup>o</sup> Rebeca Fernández Ortega

Titora: Manuela Palacios González

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de Fin de Grao

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CUBRIR ESTE FORMULARIO ELECTRONICAMENTE

**Formulario de delimitación do título e resumo**

Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2022/2023

APELIDOS E NOME:	María Rebeca Fernández Ortega.
GRAO EN:	Lengua y Literatura Inglesas.
(NO CASO DE MODERNAS) MENCIÓN EN:	
TITOR/A:	Manuela Palacios González.
LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA:	Poesía irlandesa contemporánea de autoría femenina.

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

**Título:**

**"Tuath meaning people, meaning place". An Ecocritical Analysis of Grace Wells's *The Church of the Love of the World*.**

**Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:**

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse Grace Wells' third poetry collection *The Church of the Love of the World*. The relevant aspects that will be tackled are the individual and their relationship with the environment as well as the history of Ireland. In her ecopoetry, Grace Wells vindicates the importance of nature, spirit-of-place, memory, story, myth, the land, and ecological concern in local ethnic communities, which serve as global examples. These approaches are mainly developed throughout the whole collection with the purpose of enhancing biodiversity and ecological awareness of multiple environmental crises in contemporary society. Moreover, the portrayal of environmental issues that go beyond the landscape will be explored, that is, the treatment of the individual and their suffering in the context of a relationship with nature. Significantly, globalization and the current iteration of Western culture have brought about the uniformity of the world and caused the loss of diversity by distancing human beings from nature and suppressing their love for the world.

As for the methodology, this study will employ the theoretical framework of ecocriticism in its different forms: ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and eco-spirituality. Furthermore, this analysis will be accompanied by literary criticism such as *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition* (2011) by Donna L. Potts in order to inquire into the differences between ecopoetry and pastoralism. An additional and fundamental reference will be Eóin Flannery's *Ireland and Ecocriticism* (2016), which provides a thorough ecocritical apparatus in the context of Irish literature. Finally, the article "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Eco-caring: Contemporary Debates

on Ecofeminism(s)" (2018) by Margarita Estévez Saá and María Jesús Lorenzo Modia, will orient this analysis thanks to its survey of the main debates within ecofeminism.

Santiago de Compostela, 08 de novembro de 2022.

<p>Sinatura do/a interesado/a</p> 	<p>Visto e prace (sinatura do/a titor/a)</p> <p>PALACIOS GONZALEZ MANUELA - 32626411Z</p> <p>Firmado digitalmente por PALACIOS GONZALEZ MANUELA - 32626411Z Fecha: 2022.11.08 14:04:24 +01'00'</p>	<p>Aprobado pola Comisión do Traballo de Fin de Grao coa data</p> <p>25 NOV. 2022</p>  <p>Selo da Facultade de Filoloxía</p>
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## **Declaración de orixinalidade do traballo:**

Eu, M<sup>o</sup> Rebeca Fernández Ortega declaro solemnemente que o presente TFG, titulado ““Tuath meaning people, meaning place”. An Ecocritical Analysis of Grace Wells’s *The Church of the Love of the World*”, é un traballo orixinal realizado por min baixo a supervisión e orientación da miña titora Manuela Palacios no marco do programa de Grao en Lingua e Literatura inglesas da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela.

Declaro que todo o contido presentado neste TFG é o resultado do meu propio esforzo intelectual, baseado na miña investigación e na consulta de fontes académicas fidedignas. As ideas, análises, argumentos e conclusións expresadas aquí son produto do meu traballo persoal e non foron previamente presentadas como parte doutra obra académica.

As referencias bibliográficas e citas utilizadas neste TFG están debidamente identificadas e atribuídas aos seus respectivos autores, seguindo as normas de cita e referenciación adecuadas. Todo o material utilizado e todas as contribucións doutros autores foron debidamente recoñecidos e citados.

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Por medio desta declaración, asumo a responsabilidade total polo contido e orixinalidade deste TFG.

M<sup>o</sup> Rebeca Fernández Ortega. Data: 19/06/2023

*A mis hermanas  
y en memoria de mis padres.*

*(...) When we speak, we speak on the out-breath,  
but must first draw in the fine threads of this Earth.*

*Whatever we speak of now,  
we will need to be like blades of prairie grass  
that bend in the wind of what's coming.*

*Perhaps the only sensible thing would be  
to howl, the way Europe's last  
twelve-thousand wolves are surely howling- a sound*

*somewhere between grief and battle-cry,  
the tribes of us in this together, tasked  
to heed Emerson, and Advance.*

*Advance upon chaos and the dark.*

*Grace Wells*

## Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Ecopoetry, Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism, Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Eco-spirituality: a theoretical apparatus.....	5
3. Grace Wells's <i>The Church of the Love of the World</i> .....	15
3.2 All the winds said <i>leave</i> .....	16
3.3 To bend like prairie grass.....	19
3.4 Ocean, cliff and tide.....	22
3.5 What the body holds.....	26
3.6 Psalm.....	28
3.7 In wonder and in grief.....	34
4. Conclusion.....	39
Works cited.....	42
Appendix.....	44

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse Grace Wells's third poetry collection *The Church of the Love of the World*. Grace Wells is an eco-poet and environmental writer born in London in 1968 but who settled in Ireland, Co Tipperary, in 1991. For many years, the poet Grace Wells has taught creative writing classes and poetry workshops for people with special needs as well as emerging writers in Ireland. In 2001, Wells was appointed Head of Literature at South Tipperary Arts Centre and was named Poet Laureate of Ennistymon by Clare County Council Arts Office and Poetry Ireland in 2021. As well as writing ecopoetry and communicating about the numerous environmental challenges, Grace Wells collaborates and recurrently volunteers with Hometree, planting trees and supporting the production of ecological writing. Wells's work has been awarded several times and well received in other countries with translations into Spanish, Galician and Italian. Dedalus Press has published her poetry collections, the most recent one in May 2022, *The Church of the Love of the World*. Wells is based in Ennistymon, on the west coast of Ireland, where she founded The Little Sanctuary, a small retreat shelter, forest-garden and nature preserve for people, creatures, and plant species. Despite the restrictions and confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic, Wells managed to make short eco-poetry films not only as a way to connect people through poetry but also to connect people to nature. The objective was to overcome this dichotomy between nature and isolation during this traumatic event in 2020. This is important to mention since most of her poems in this third collection were produced under these conditions, and as a result, Wells's creative writing increased during this period. Wells has expressed her environmental commitment with the following words: "As an eco-poet navigating the griefs of environmental collapse, it's so helpful to belong to a community where people are genuinely working to halt Ireland's biodiversity loss, and actively creating initiatives to help the country become carbon-neutral (Poet Laureate). Her purpose is to make people reconnect with the natural world in these difficult times of endangered nature. In her eco-poetry, she portrays a sense of belonging through Irish stories and especially, an interconnected relationship between nature and human beings through this Gaelic word *Tuath*, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means "'tribe' or 'people' in Ireland; hence, the territory or district of a tribe" ("Tuath."). This suggests that "*Tuath*" meant the geographical territory as well as the people who lived in that particular place. Wells invites these ethnic communities into her literary production to reflect upon primitive stories that are intertwined with Irish culture, and to have them ask themselves: if this is your land, where is your story? As Grace

Wells has remarkably claimed “Stories got asleep beneath globalisation and the modern world. All these stories are underneath them, so we need to write to come in and wake up sort of the sleeping beauty and bring the stories back out and connect to the sacredness of the place” (“Just to say”). The world’s constant change and globalisation have distanced the individual from the significance of stories and places. The intricate relationship that Wells is very interested in and explores throughout her whole collection is about the way place impacts people and vice versa. To this end, the relevant aspects that will be examined in this dissertation are the intimate relationship of the individual with nature and its connections to the history of Ireland.

Moreover, Wells dives into different explorations such as ecological issues that go beyond the landscape, that is, the treatment of the individual and their suffering in the context of a relationship with the environment, something that Wells achieves outstandingly. Globalisation and Western culture have worked at a demanding and deliberately fast pace and caused an alarming amount of pollution due to the increasing use of plastics, driving cars and among various other factors. These daily Western activities destroy the Earth herself and prevent human beings from having this communion and relationship with her, and the possibility to survive as creatures and species. Consequently, this analysis will employ the theoretical framework of ecocriticism in its different forms: ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and eco-spirituality, as well as current readings of literary genres such as pastoralism and post-pastoralism.

Firstly, Grace Wells’s work will be studied in relation to the literary genres of pastoralism and post-pastoralism. The tradition of pastoral literature was practised in Ireland by W. B Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh, but writers like Wells have succeeded in adding new configurations of nature. As we can observe in Donna Potts’s *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition*:

Contemporary Irish pastoral, whether in Northern Ireland or the Republic, has sought a pastoral retreat from which to gain heightened sensitivity to the environmental threats to that retreat—whether they be motorways and high rises that jeopardise sacred sites; global warming, which endangers flora and fauna; or acid rain and other pollutants that permeate the ecosphere.  
(13)

Manuela Palacios argues that landscape has been a very important element of the national identity of Ireland, and can be affected by environmental, economic, or political reasons over

time. Thus, this makes the individual wonder how eco-poets respond to these changes.  
(Coursework)

Furthermore, environmental activism has been one of the most important considerations of ecocriticism. Grace Wells as an eco-poet and activist denounces environmental aggressions and shows her preoccupation towards ecological crises in her literary work. As Eóin Flannery argues in *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History and Environmental Justice*:

By exposing the deep structures of anthropocentric discourses which sustain deliberately exploitative ideas and attitudes towards the natural environment (...) ecocriticism may explore the ideological threads in the constructions of the non-human world and develop tools for ecologically informed readings. (4)

Significantly, Wells attempts to inform the reader of social practices in front of the non-human world that must be changed in contemporary Western society.

The present dissertation will examine Wells's work from an ecofeminist perspective as well since the poetic voices in most of her poems are women calling for the urgent protection of Mother Earth. Ecofeminism has been known as a theoretical discourse and movement whose main argument is the intersection of gender and the environment. As explained by ecofeminist writers, "a related endeavour is being carried out under the hybrid label "ecofeminism," "[...] the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature" (Estévez and Lorenzo 135). Ecofeminism describes the interrelations that have been established in history between nature and women from historical, political, psychological, spiritual, and cultural views. Ecofeminists have asserted that "the beginnings of the degradation of women and nature in the establishment of patriarchal societies substituted previous matriarchal cultures, and the replacement of those Goddess religions that regarded the Earth and women as sacred" (Estévez and Lorenzo 126). Wells portrays patriarchal examples trying to dominate both women and nature by using feminine images of Ireland. "Ecological feminists today (...) continue to expose and denounce how the patriarchal binary thought system has separated men from women, and culture from nature, and equated women with nature" (Estévez and Lorenzo 129). As a result, this system has set hierarchical distinctions among these groups, and the domination and violence exerted over them have been justified. Ecofeminists seek to propose solutions and strategies such as making people question and deconstruct those traditional dichotomies that have continued in the Western binary system of thought.

Similarly, Wells attempts to enhance environmental and feminist consciousness by expressing her deep concern with the exploitation of nature and hierarchical structures of domination that prevail in Western society. As Grace Wells argues:

Western culture is more comfortable with status, security, and power; with anything that can distance us from the unpredictability, change, threat, and decay that nature represents. Western culture does not like us to see its own powerlessness and perishability. And it is not comfortable about looking out beyond the earth into a universe of two trillion galaxies, and seeing our insignificance. We have been taught to believe that the qualities of powerlessness, vulnerability and insignificance that nature shows us, are both shameful to us as societies and individuals. (“Culture and Nature” 153)

This dissertation is broadly divided into two main chapters: the first chapter is dedicated to the theoretical apparatus. This section encompasses the distinct standpoints of ecocriticism such as ecopoetry, ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism and eco-spirituality. In addition, this analysis presents other critical discourses such as pastoralism and post-pastoralism as well as posthumanism, transcorporeality and deep ecology. The second chapter is devoted to the thorough analysis of Grace Wells's *The Church of the Love of The World*, where the theoretical framework, mentioned above, will be implemented during the discussion. This section will focus primarily on the connections Wells draws with Irish history and the current individual's relationship with nature.

## **2. Ecopoetry, Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism, Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Eco-spirituality: a theoretical apparatus.**

This chapter will be devoted to the discussion of the theoretical apparatus that will be applied to Grace Wells's work in depth. With this in mind, it will be convenient to first proceed with the general concept of eco-poetry.

Ecopoetry is a genre of poetry that delves into the intricate relationship between humans and the non-human world. It serves as a literary answer to urgent environmental challenges and endeavours to foster environmental consciousness. Ecopoetry aims to enhance a profound sense of connection, reverence, and empathy for the Earth through rich imagery, sensory language, and metaphorical examinations grounded in nature. Ecopoets address urgent issues such as climate change, deforestation and other natural destructions such as species extinction. A vital premise is the interconnectedness of all living beings, highlighting the interdependence and balance of ecosystems. Ecopoetry provokes reflection, stimulates

discussion, and encourages action in the face of ecological degradation. Eco-poets may examine the processes of nature, seasons, climate patterns, and the intricate elements of flora and fauna. At moments, they utilise ecocentric viewpoints, questioning anthropocentrism and advocating for the inherent significance and rights of non-human entities.

According to David Borthwick mutual involvement, interdependence, moral accountability, and acknowledgement of an uneven dualism are the essential features of eco-poetry:

The central concern of eco-poetry is recognition of human entanglement in the world. It explores the relationship that humans have with a shared world, at once connected to it, but also increasingly estranged from it. Eco-poetry seeks to question and renegotiate the human position in respect of the environment in which we are enmeshed. Its ethic is to oppose the violent assumption that the world around us exists merely as a set of resources which can be readily and unethically exploited and degraded for economic gain. (Flannery 56)

Natural space and national identity are often connected and this leads to several issues of interest for ecocriticism, which are anthropocentrism and utilitarianism. The use of landscape is to serve anthropocentric interests, which benefit a human community. Individuals who are apathetic towards the needs of nature are often concerned with their own needs, rather than those of humankind as a whole. This is one of the problems in the face of the environmental collapse that eco-poets like Grace Wells want to manifest in their works. Terry Gifford claims, as well, that eco-poetry is firstly marked by:

“an emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world; such a perspective leads to a devotion to specific places and to the land itself; second: ‘an imperative toward humility in relationship with both human and nonhuman nature’; and finally: ‘an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe’”. (Flannery 57)

In order to understand and to spread awareness regarding the specific processes of the planet’s climatic reaction to anthropogenic pollution, individuals must appreciate the planet’s and humanity’s deep pasts which have been mutually implicated since ancient times and recognize the impact of human actions on the environment. For many writers, poetry has served as a representational and aesthetic form uniquely suited for conveying and evoking adequate emotional reactions to climate change and its planetary footprints. An effective work of eco-poetry interprets the urgencies of contemporary environmental issues.

As Grace Wells remarkably expresses in “Culture and Nature: The Roots of Ecopoetics”:

In ecopoetry, nature and culture again run side by side. Ultimately their root is the bringing together of all our homes, eco for our environments of Earth and body, and poetry for the homes of culture and the soul. For me poetry has always been about spiritual autobiography. What is your spiritual autobiography in these challenging times? I often read the statement that as we treat the body, so we treat the earth. And I want to change that to “as we treat the en-souled body, so we treat the en-souled earth. (159)

Grace Wells’s *The Church of the Love of The World* does not only reach the proximities of political issues regarding the Irish landscape and Irish past or issues like climate change, environmental justice, colonisation, gender, aggressive capitalism and globalisation. But Wells’s work also asserts the internal conflicts dwelling in every individual and their cosmovision in front of this modern nature-exploiting. Significantly, millions of human beings undergo illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases, depression and different pathologies due to the stressful and suffocating demands of Western culture. For this purpose, Wells does not limit herself to the conflict outside but covers the inside troubles reflected in the state of humans and correlates them to the state of the environment in her ecopoetry as well.

Furthermore, it is necessary to understand Wells’s work in terms of pastoralism and post-pastoralism due to the representation of the Irish natural landscape, the land, and other rural places that are set in her poems. Terry Gifford employs the term “Post-pastoral” to “describe works in which the retreat serves to prompt the reader to the urgent need for responsibility and action on behalf of the environment” (Potts “Preface”). Pastoral poetry seeks to present the human relation to the natural world by emphasising the harmony between human nature and nature itself, showcasing the corruption in the city versus the purity of the idealised rural life.

Pastoral constructions of Ireland brought about the means to critique not only British colonisation but also the outcomes of modernisation and industrialisation. Ireland’s colonisation led to a distinct relation regarding language and land, which shaped and mutated its own pastoral tradition. Since ancient times, such distinctions have been defined by Celtic and Saxon identities in this country. As a result, Ireland came to symbolise the rural part and

England the industrial part. Hence, this pastoral tradition establishes Irish national identity and showcases the havoc wreaked by British colonisation.

The pastoral tradition idealises rural life and nature, while the post-pastoral tradition challenges and critiques this idealisation, addressing environmental issues and the complexities of human-nature relationships. In later generations, writers based on Irish culture like Wells continued to rely on the post-pastoral tradition of ecopoetry in postcolonial times. Wells depicts the use of nature to a different degree in order to protest against these forces, as mentioned above, by combining her poetry with descriptions of the state of the environment and humanity as a kind of outcry.

An insightful example that highlights the impact of pastoral tradition on contemporary Irish poetry can be found in the works of Seamus Heaney:

[...] Heaney's characterization of pre-Christian Ireland as a time "when the landscape was sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities." Even early Irish Christianity maintained the belief in "the seamlessness of sacred and secular spheres" to a greater extent than other branches of the church, incorporating Ireland's holy wells, springs, and sacred mounds and hills into its ecclesiastical rituals. (Potts 14)

Moreover, it is important to note the different configurations that Seamus Heaney makes compared to the English pastoral and even to Irish poets like W.B Yeats and Kavanagh due to the fact that Heaney immerses more into the Irish nature writing genre known as *Dinnseanchas* which, according to Heaney, concerns poems and tales that are related to the origin and authentic meanings of place names, and comprises a form of mythological etymology. Heaney's pastoral is similar to Grace Wells's work since Wells recounts pre-Christian origins, indigenous practices and portrays the sacredness of places in her ecopoetry, recounting the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Irish era with the prominent attempt to reconnect with the land.

Furthermore, Wells's work has to be studied, as was mentioned above, from an ecofeminist perspective. In her poetry, most of the poetic voices and characters are depicted as women. Additionally, there is also the universal personification of mother nature as Goddesses vindicating their land, the natural world and indigenous origins, which have been tamed by imperialism and all its aftereffects. On that account, the effort to restore women's image to the natural space is a hallmark of some manifestations of ecofeminism.

In exploring the intricate relationships between gender, ecology, and power, ecofeminism brings attention to the interconnectedness of the subjugation of women, indigenous peoples, and the domination of the natural world. This critical perspective prompts a scrutiny of patriarchal power in two distinct dimensions. As Flannery argues:

Ecofeminism raises the issue of the structural interconnection between the domination of women, natives and the domination of nature. This leads to a critique of patriarchal power in two specific forms: firstly, the idea of progress, modernization and development and, secondly, the dominant notions of science and technology. Both of them involve epistemic and physical violence over the structural 'others' and are related to the European Enlightenment ideal of 'reason'. (59)

Ecofeminism correlates the exploitation of the Earth with the domination of women and brings together respect for the Earth as well as for women despite being seen as different battles. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies have noted that modern science is not a worldwide and value-free configuration of knowledge, and, thus, consider that the dominant scientific discourse is, in fact, a projection of Western male values. Most of the ideologies of enlighteners such as Voltaire and Rousseau lay on the premise of the value of equality, but they actually fostered double standard morality by applying their practices in favour of men. One of the main tenets of ecofeminism is that 'women' and 'nature' have been concurrently 'othered' and oppressed beneath patriarchal capitalism.

Similarly, Wells's work shows that both women and the environment have been subordinated and repressed by the anthropocentric way of life that humanity and patriarchy have imposed on them. As a feminist and ecologist writer, Wells vindicates female myths of Irish Goddesses and contrasts them with the colonisers who wanted to rape and conquer the land. Simultaneously, Wells advocates for environmental sustainability to aid endangered species and preserve natural spaces in the world.

Furthermore, Wells seems to fit with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who portrays in her work an intimate relationship between woman and nature embodied in the powerful form of Mother Earth. As postcolonial poetry, both invite the readers in their works to observe beneath the surface of the power structure by returning to ancient Celtic traditions and finding the force that women and nature possessed in prehistory. The ancient notion of the 'Great Mother' does not only relate to the mother figure of nature protecting her creatures, fauna and land, but it also entails solutions to heal the existing separation between human vs nonhuman, material vs

spiritual, nature vs culture. Hence, the whole concept also functions as a helpful approach within the framework of ecofeminism.

Moreover, other discourses of ecofeminism can intersect with theoretical notions of transcorporeality and thereby posthumanism. These critical approaches attempt to subvert the existing dualities and dichotomies among the human world and the non-human world by opposing social norms and anthropocentric ends that reside in an oppressive environment:

The apparent emphasis on corporeality brings such ecofeminist discourse into conversation with the 'body politics' of earlier feminist interventions, and specifically, this is evidenced in Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality'. Alaimo explicitly sites her ecocritical ethic within the lineage of feminist body politics, while intersecting with both Oppermann's and Iovino's posthumanist position. For Alaimo, part of the ecofeminist project is a readiness to accept a diminution of humanity's agency, as she implicitly alludes to the delusional and destructive politics of a hubristic patriarchal system. (Flannery 62)

Alaimo's transcorporeality effort questions and seeks to overthrow dual structures that reside in the patriarchal system. According to Alaimo, feminism posits that the female body has been exposed and marginalised below the intellect in importance, and simultaneously over-inscribed by the economic and moral precepts dictated by patriarchy. In this way, the ecofeminist critique takes it upon itself to broaden the constituency of the oppressed to add non-human nature as well. Consequently, Alaimo fosters feminist and environmental ethics by acknowledging the substantial interconnections between human being corporeality and the more-than-human world.

The paradigms of transcorporeality and posthumanism align with the discourse of Grace Wells. These frameworks reshape our understanding of the connections between the human and non-human realms, as well as the interactions that occur between them, with the aim of reconstructing a new relational ontology. By doing so, these approaches provide a fresh perspective on the nature of existence within a world marked by various forms of oppression, rigid binary boundaries, and ecological deterioration. They invite us to re-evaluate our understanding of being in the face of these challenges. (Flannery 61)

At present, ecofeminists argue that the individual cannot know culture apart from nature. Therefore, there is an urgent need to become aware of the social factors that reflect not only how nature has been treated, but also how it has been known. The focus of ecofeminists is on proposing alternative discourses in order to reject the imposition of hierarchies and to stress

interconnection and interdependence that must prevail among human beings and non-human nature in order to survive as species.

It is pertinent to note the manifestation of eco-spirituality in Wells's work due to the interconnectedness of the individual with the environment presented in her poetry and concurrently the role of eco-activist that Wells professionally undertakes in her career. Likewise, eco-spirituality is an ethic that embraces non-violence and sustainability. Therefore, it entails respect for all manifestations of living beings, the natural balance, and processes of the environment as well as the harmonious uses of all natural resources. The concept of sustainability refers to the non-depletion of existing natural materials in order to maintain ecosystem diversity.

Joanna Macy's *Spiritual ecology 'The Cry of the Earth'* delves into the intersection of spirituality and environmentalism. It explores the deep connection between humans and the natural world, emphasising the need for a spiritual and ecological awakening to address the environmental challenges humans face. This book brings together various perspectives, teachings, and practices from different spiritual traditions, highlighting the importance of reconnecting with nature and recognizing the sacredness of the Earth. It calls for a profound shift in consciousness and behaviour to foster a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the planet. Similarly, Grace Wells demonstrates these substantial principles by fostering the emergence of the spiritual ecology movement and the urgent need to live within an ethic of caring for the Earth:

The world is not a problem to be solved; it is a living being to which we belong. The world is part of our own self and we are a part of its suffering wholeness. Until we go to the root of our image of separateness, there can be no healing. And the deepest part of our separateness from creation lies in our forgetfulness of its sacred nature, which is also our own sacred nature. (Thich Nhat Hanh 7)

Indigenous people have long understood that the human relationship with the Earth sustains individuals both spiritually and physically. For indigenous people, this is often embedded in their way of life and embodied in their rituals and prayers. In Western culture, individuals struggle to observe this spiritual nourishment characterised by beauty, peace, and a sense of wonder that the natural world bestows. This is part of the quality of life seldom appreciated, at

present, by people and governments due to the capitalist worldview of the global economy that has led to the ecological crisis.

Humanity has somehow come to believe that they are at the centre of the universe as the most important species and that the Earth and other living species are all at their service. This has resulted in a very human-centred view of the world. According to activist and humanitarian Satish Kumar, who has advocated for the environment and the individual relationship to it both physically and spiritually:

The contemporary environmental movement, in the main, follows the path of empirical science, rational thinking, data collection and external action. This is good as far as it goes but it doesn't go far enough. We need to include care of the soul as a part of care of the planet (...) Care for the soil and the soil needs to be extended to include care for society. In spite of the unprecedented growth in the economy, science, technology and world trade. (146)

Satish Kumar stresses the need for both spiritual health and self-care for individuals like Wells's work in order to defend and care for the world that surrounds every living being. Notably, Kumar argues that if humankind is incapable of seeing this reality, they are likely to collapse before they are in a position to make any change. Human beings' souls and the soil are inextricable like co-inhabitants of planet Earth. For this purpose, humans must treat each with the same respect.

Another standpoint of eco-spirituality to be considered is deep ecology, which defends the intrinsic value of all living creatures regardless of their use for human self-interest. In this sense, the notions of deep ecology posit the natural world as a subtle equilibrium of intricate interactions that organisms are bound to depend on each other for their own subsistence within ecosystems. Significantly, it fosters the appreciation of wilderness and all living beings for their own sake and not for their usefulness and benefit for humankind. At present, it has become evident that a deep ecological approach is crucial to guarantee biodiversity, sustainability and the existence of all species in a long-term.

In emphasising the significance of deep ecological solutions, Vandana Shiva claims in interviews that these approaches are crucial for ensuring basic needs, dignity, and cultural significance for every individual, both human and non-human, while safeguarding the right to existence and a dignified life for the majority of humanity:

Deep ecological solutions are the only viable solutions to ensuring that every person on this planet has enough food, has enough water, has adequate shelter, has dignity and has a cultural meaning in life. If we don't follow the path of living in ways that we leave enough space for other species, that paradigm also ensures that most human beings will be denied their right to existence. A system that denies the intrinsic value of other species denies eighty percent of humanity, their right to a dignified survival and a dignified life. (...) embrace the right to life of all on this planet, all humans and all species.

As human rights have been recognised, deep ecology demands the recognition of the rights of nature as well. Human relationship with nature has to be integrated into a growing understanding of the principles and values of non-violence and reverence for all life forms. For this purpose, deep ecology leads inevitably to reverential ecology and to eco-spirituality.

Furthermore, one of the aspects that Wells also covers in her work is the concept of the spirit of place. This approach relates to classical Roman religion when Romans honoured 'genius loci', the 'protective spirit of place' and it implied an intangible attribute of a material place, that is perceived both spiritually and physically. The spirit of the place connects to the consciousness that dwelt in forests, trees, wells, rivers and lakes. Ancient cultures regarded the landscape as sacred and managed to establish a sacred geography to define it. Pagans have learned that particular places possess a unique atmosphere, an intuitive connection to nature, and a sense of presence and this is in tune with the sacredness of places. Wells fosters these aspects, and suggests that the Earth must be protected as much as living beings since her work demonstrates that individuals should not have dominion over other species

The development in sciences, technologies, economics, and philosophies in the past, have unfortunately elevated humankind to a dominant role and assigned them a superior status in front of the nonhuman-world. A global worldview has been constructed and dictated only by the interests of humankind over other species. In this sense, animals, rainforests, rivers and seas are simply meant to satisfy and meet not only human ends but also their cravings and desires. This type of mindset has been termed 'speciesism', which implies that humans are superior over all other species.

This anthropocentric view has brought about the loss of spiritual, reciprocal, respectful relationships among human beings and the rest of nature. With time, humankind has relied upon the belief that they are separate from nature and thus, above it. The natural world is out in the forests, the rivers, the birds, and in every creature, whereas individuals remain enclosed

in their houses, palaces, buildings, cars and airplanes, and they invade outside whenever they want to.

Significantly, humanity has been at war against nature through the ages of trade, industry, technology, and science that have damaged the biosphere and the land with deforestation, products, chemicals, and all forms of pollutants. As a result, birds and animals have become endangered species since they have been treated unfairly and used with the aim to obtain profit and benefits by means of commercial ends. The ongoing destruction of rainforest and temperate forests has been justified with the aim to develop more areas of cultivable land for the agro-industry. The fishing industry continues to severely affect the ocean and the coral reefs that evidently are indispensable for marine life. The massive amount of suffering on marine or terrestrial species is another instance of how human beings are at war with nature.

Western culture has blinded individuals from the effects of the materialistic world perpetuated on the ecosystem as Grace Well affirms:

And this is how we live; our daily Western activities are destroying our own planet and its species. We all are living in a triangle between endangered nature, Western culture, and selfhood. How can we stay emotionally well and “happy”, how can we thrive and flourish as individuals when we have to constantly live with the tragedies and ironies of our time?. (“Culture and Nature”)

The ecological crisis has been caused by several layers of factors, as aforementioned from the beginning of this ecocritical analysis, but the root of the problems resides in this state of the spiritual disconnection of humans towards nature. For this reason, humanity must overcome this duality and detachment from the environment in order to restore its balance. In truth, nature is not simply out there, but is part of the human species and she is as much a living organism as humans are. Therefore, there has to be a respectful and harmonious relationship with the earth that is the only one sustaining all living beings.

Estévez and Lorenzo highlight how Wells's text and poetry shed light on the silencing of nature's language and the forced abandonment of our innate connection to it:

Wells's text and her own poems offer a sound reflection on and a demonstration of how not only the language of nature has been silenced, but also of how we humans have been forced to renounce any ownership of a natural, primeval language. This has culturally and artificially separated humans from the non-human world and, what is more, as Wells most convincingly argues, has also

deprived both us and nature of our inherently shared source of power and vitality, a deprivation that stands at the root of the contemporary state of the unhealthiness of both humans and nature. (141)

Wells not only addresses the external problems in her poetry such as the state of the environment but also the internal problems regarding the physical and mental health of human beings. The latter serves as a great mirage of the degeneration of the natural and human world. Wells emphasises the indispensable co-existence and interrelationship among nature and living species.

For this purpose, humanity must come to the conclusion that what they do to the environment, they do to themselves and can lead to the demise of nature as much as to their own destruction. In this sense, everything is interconnected as we live in an interdependent world and thus, the unity of humans and nature is vital in order to come to a new spiritual understanding and survive as species. Wells unites the care of the external world along with the care of the internal world in order to reach this interconnectedness with the Earth and the recognition for all life forms.

### **3. Grace Wells's *The Church of the Love of the World*.**

Grace Wells's *The Church of Love of the World* brings a global and urgent ecological message, reminding every individual of the perilous state of the Earth in contemporary Western society. This collection explores the intricate and indispensable interrelationship between living beings and the natural world. Therefore, it is profoundly concerned with the environmental collapse that mirrors the mental health crisis that the current individual faces. Wells's poetry showcases the inner nature of the individual by connecting their sufferings and struggles with the breakdown of the environment in order to reach an understanding of the Earth's well-being.

The root of these problems resides in the spiritual disconnection towards the non-human world in our modern nature-exploiting cosmivision. Thus, Grace Wells prompts to restore this connection and relationship with the natural world by showcasing long poems and sequences filled with experiences of distress, anger and grief in front of all types of anthropogenic pollutants threatening animals and causing serious risks to the human body's life itself through illnesses such as cancer. These sequences of poems create a personal space to explore a depth of emotions by counterpointing the grief with the beauty and wonder that

nature bestows to the poetic persona. In addition, passages are replete with lessons and learning due to moments of epiphanies and reflections on the land, history, and identity of the individual. Wells places particular emphasis on the history of Ireland by portraying Irish landscapes and enhancing Gaelic words such as *feis*, *tuath*, *domhain* to forefront the value of land, language and the value of poetry itself.

*The Church of the Love of the World*, is divided into eight parts, starting with two poems entitled “*Vestige*” and “*We Speak on the Out Breath*” followed by the sections of poems entitled: “*All the winds said leave*”, “*To bend like prairie grass*”, “*Ocean, cliff and tide*”, “*What the body holds*”, “*Psalm*” and lastly, “*In wonder and in grief*”, which will be the central focus of this dissertation. In the first poem, “*Vestige*”, Wells introduces the opening lines to instantly link the natural world, that is disappearing, with the individual from the very moment the pages (leaves) of her book are read: “Things so urgent, when you / open a book its leaves should take you / back to the forest they came from,” (11). In this way, Wells’s purpose is “mending the world between endpapers / in such a deep entangling way / as to make you part of the woodland,”(11). This intertwining between the individual and nature is the central premise in the elaboration and structure of Grace Wells’s poetry collection. Wells highlights the profound importance of grass in her poetry, linking it to the beginnings of life and world economies:

In ‘Grass’, when I say ‘where it all begins’, I really mean so much of the earthly life, so much literally begins down in the grass. The insects, the ants, the butterflies among the dandelions, the beginnings of grain on which we all depend. On which world economies depend. So much is rooted down in the grass (...) in ‘She Gathers the Wild Grasses’, I am moving closer all the time to the transcendental nature of grass, and its role in my life as a source of the sacred. And this resonates with many of the other poems, where in different ways, I am trying to name the sacred within nature. I often reveal small revelations, small moments of divinity experienced within the natural world. (Wells 2023)

### **3.2 *All the winds said leave.***

One of the most remarkable poems in this section is “*Charm bracelet*”, divided into past and present actions, deals with the individual’s adoration and love for their homeland and their quest to recover the memory of ancient Ireland beneath layers of history. Therefore, this poem explores the desire to take a deeper look at one’s roots, especially the Irish identity, with the attempt to restore Éire’s real beauty and magic under all the decoration of nature. In this sense, the title is very intentional through the idea of collecting charms for a bracelet and

metaphorically, comparing it with the traces of nature that the poetic voice is searching for. In addition, this poem presents religious references and its title also carries religious connotations, as this idea of collecting treasures can be compared to every bead of a rosary “But I kept on looking / stringing a catechism, like collection charms for / a bracelet.” (24).

Firstly, Wells introduces an epigraph “‘Hibernia’ meant the land of eternal winter” (24). The Classical Latin term Hibernia was the name given by the Romans to Ireland c. 320 BC, so this Irish mythological Goddess is known for being the female and national personification of Ireland. Moreover, other denominations were Ierne, Iouernia and (H)iberio, all of which are adaptations of a stem from which Éire and Erin derived as well. Nonetheless, this female figure is not only depicted in an attempt to enhance Irish patriotism but also to portray how nature manifests itself.

Wells presents in “*Charm bracelet*” an allegory of the opposition between Christianity and the natural world that represents the Irish pagan traditions. The rise of Christianity took place in the fifth century after the Romans left. Before this, ancient Ireland was inhabited by Celtic tribes, who were deeply connected to the natural world and they believed that every part of nature possessed a spirit. Therefore, the poetic persona’s desire is to seek for this Celtic ancestry buried beneath all the layers of snow covering the entire emerald isle.

In the first stanza, the poetic persona visits the ruins of Cashel's Rock, “And me being me, I go all over Cashel’s Rock / looking for signs of nature” (24). One of the oldest monuments of the Gaelic kingdom of Munster and, according to legends, this castle was known to be the site of the conversion of King Aenghus to Christianity done by St. Patrick in the 5th century. Likewise, this site is where Brian Boru was crowned High King of Ireland in 978, who later made Cashel his capital. With time, the place eventually became one of the most prominent centres of ecclesiastical power in Ireland, which underlines the contrast between the natural beauty of the location and the sign of Christianity that was planted there. Thus, this tension can be seen throughout the whole poem and is accentuated through a hyperbole such as “clergy and kings not having half the potency of meadow flowers” (24).

In the second and third stanzas, the poetic voice enumerates different herbs and plants with specific vocabulary to describe them by expressing curiosity about their past uses in medieval times. “How honey became mead; how rosemary / and sage made metheglins [...] I want to

know which strewing herbs they / tossed on floors, pennyroyal against ticks, / hyssop, fleabane, rue for the churches, / mint and chamomile to sweeten air” (24). These lines lead to a moment of epiphany for the poetic voice, as she realises that the use of these herbs is later merely for decoration in the fifth and sixth stanzas “It was like following a trail of crumbs, nature / banished to mere decoration; / ornament on the furniture in the museum: / wooden acorns, and oaken swathe of foliage” (24). This entails those plants used in wooden furniture and in stone friezes. This is Grace Wells’s approach as a post-pastoral writer since she goes against the idealisation of the landscape and objectification of nature. As such, this is an environmental critique of the role of nature as an agent valued only by its usefulness for Western human consumerism.

Furthermore, Wells also employs a comparison such as “*The higher you build, the closer you come to heaven*” (24), which is a Christian reference used to convey the aim of being closer to the sky where God is. “Wattle marks in the plaster” (24) suggests that there are visible imprints or impressions of wattle within the plaster of a wall or structure. This imagery can carry a symbolic meaning, as can convey a sense of history, tradition, or a connection to nature through the use of natural elements such as wooden sticks. The wattle marks may symbolise the enduring presence of the natural world or the influence of past generations at the present. Moreover, the phrase could signify the beauty of imperfections as the Japanese philosophy of *kintsugi* and the resilience of the Irish people in the face of layers of history “searching the cracks of history / for any clue” (24).

Moreover, apart from specific plants and herbs, the poetic voice also describes animals that carry symbolic meanings in the fifth stanza “a sandstone bull with wings, and eagle feathered.” (24), which is a hyperbole to convey that the real beauty of real Ireland is underneath the snow and winter. This could also indicate the transition from winter to spring in order to imply that Ireland has found her true self. As for the sandstone bull, it refers to Luke the Evangelist, who was one of the writers of the canonical gospels and is often depicted as being accompanied by a bull with wings. Likewise, Wells employs various similes such as “eagle feathered with granite diamonds like the scales of a fish” (24), which are full of biological and geological references and they highlight the relevance of nature for the poetic persona. In addition, a religious reference to John Evangelist, since he was often symbolically represented by an eagle.

In the seventh stanza, the image of the charms for a bracelet reappears again, mirroring the poetic voice's search for nature and plants that will guide her to her ancestral roots. Wells manages to employ intentional enjambment, many stopped stanzas and sound patterns to create expectation, which mirror the curiosity of the poetic persona: "a long-stemmed lily whose petals strained / towards God, whose sepals spiraled / back to the good Earth" (25). There is an internal rhyme between "petals" and "sepals", which have been fused to create two different combinations of words. This can be seen as though these petals strained to look up to heaven and to look down on Earth. In addition, there is a par rhyme between the word "God" and "Good" to contrast these two dimensions of heaven and the good Earth below.

In the last stanza, the poetic voice finally ends this pre-colonial quest and finds Éire "It is hard to find her intricacies within the grandeur, / but nonetheless she is there" (25). Significantly, Grace Wells as an ecofeminist writer, presents the feminine-nature humanising metaphor through the Mother Goddess Earth (as a mother figure as well) and the omnipresence of Mother nature: "the feminine, lifting her lovely head" (25). In this sense, Wells attempts to raise awareness of colonialism's role in the exploitation of natural resources across human history. Nonetheless, despite the power of English monarchs and Christianity over the land, a glimpse of Ireland can be seen under the covered snow in "*Charm bracelet*". Wells employs this metaphor throughout the whole poem to portray how Ireland's true ancestral identity has been buried for centuries by Christianity and British rule. Interestingly, the last stanza is a mirror image of the first, as both stanzas are composed of three lines in contrast to the rest of the poem. Hence, both stanzas can be seen as though they were fused, representing the beginning and the end of "*Charm bracelet*".

### **3.3 To bend like prairie grass.**

This section presents the introductory poem "*Grass*", a poem that commemorates the intimate and intricate world of grass. Wells celebrates biodiversity through the growth of the lawn and memorial of Ireland's wild grasses. Therefore, an invitation to delve into the complex beauty of nature by allowing the lawn to go long. Wells employs a rich sound-world of specialised botanical language: "of spikelets and seed-head, / soft, blowsy, tufted, / florets and anthers and awns" (37) in order to welcome the reader to the natural world and abandonment of the 'cultured one'. "*Grass*" is followed by "*She Gathers the Wild Grasses*", and this close

attention to the natural world is elegantly expressed in both poems by describing in precise detail the blades of wild grasses the poetic persona encounters in Ireland as well as in Italy.

In "*She Gathers the Wild Grasses*", Wells introduces two fragments from the poem *Daffodils* by the English poet Ted Hughes and a fragment belonging to Eihei Dogen, a Japanese Buddhist, writer, and philosopher. These two excerpts emphasise the interdependent relationship between the human-world and the non-human world. As Hughes, ironically, states "Still nomads – Still strangers / To our whole possession" (38), which resonates with the very line "Something forever illiterate" (43) as a way to exemplify the lack of respect and learning of Western attitude towards Earth.

The poetic persona describes the grass growing on the road of Panicale, Italy, which makes her travel back in time imagining the first seeds cultivated by women and hence, being the first farmers. In this way, the feminisation of agriculture serves as an indicator of Wells's critique towards the androcentric culture that positions men as the centre of economic, socio-cultural, and historical life.

Grace Wells has discussed her contemplation over the past few years regarding the phrase "man and nature" and how the term "woman and nature" is seldom heard:

I am very curious to know more about the relationship that women can have with nature. It feels to me to be a profoundly wise relationship, and I suppose I am looking at that relationship in this poem. In different ways. I am meditating on the many different things I know about women and grass. It begins with my simply touching and gathering the grasses. And moves through very many relations: women & children hungry because Western farming methods have used too much glyphosate and caused high gluten intolerance, which led people, often women, to buy grains that were not wheat, like quinoa, which led the prices of those staple foods to become impossibly high, so women starved. As I touch the grasses, I meditate on all the impacts 'man and nature' has on 'women and nature'. (Wells 2023)

Grace Wells discusses a woman whose child is born with a damaged heart, highlighting how a pregnant woman's proximity to farmland is one of the primary causes of infant heart defects. The poem primarily explores the experience of being a woman in a patriarchal world. While women can pursue careers, possess material objects, and enjoy various concrete "equalities," the poem questions our connection to the natural world we have inherited. The concept of "woman and nature" is already largely shaped by the actions of men and their impact on nature. Interestingly, it was women who initially pioneered agriculture and gained knowledge about seeds, grasses, and grains. The poem aims to encourage women to once again establish an engaged and powerful relationship with nature but in a 21st-century context.

At first, the poetic persona describes joyfully the stone house at Panicle where she is staying and the birdsong that resonates with it. The account describes different types of flowers in the meadow, including tall daisies, trefoils, vetches, orchids, and countless scattered flowers in the landscape, yet the poetic voice emphasises the grass. Similarly, the non-human world presents a wealth of nocturnal wildlife, encompassing tawny owls, bats, and fireflies, adding to the richness of the natural environment.. Moreover, the lyric voice mentions the San Ignacio Lagoon, considered, nowadays, a sanctuary for the grey whales and for other species as well, which is located in Mexico. “*it’s the wild creatures that give me shelter.*” (39).

The transcendental symbol of grass preserves its essence while being transformed into art and establishing a connection to broader issues concerning the distribution of grain. In this sense, the poetic persona describes different types of grass through seven segments. “I lay the different grasses / along a page of my notebook, [...] An assemblage of meadow-art, / arranged on white paper / with the hope that seed or form will gift / me meaning, sane and nourishing as grain.” (40). Therefore, the poem harmoniously describes different types of grasses, including Italian rye, anisantha, timothy, and among others. Intriguingly, Grace Wells depicts ancient times where Goddesses, at their sanctuaries, revered wheat and bread as sacred sustenance, symbolising the enduring significance of grass across generations.

In this poem, the rich segment brings another agriculture “As if my woman’s hand could / bring our tribes to rest, / and let the wild grasses / offer up another agriculture –/ white-rooted, rhizomed, mycorrhizal,/ all things in their connection” (43). The roots of these grasses become a way of speaking for connection and interconnectedness as the hand of the woman does, which resounds throughout the poem. The loose stitched hem serves as a metaphor for the connection that grass offers to nature worldwide. In this sense, the invitation beckons us to behold the recurrent images of the wildlife, the roots, and the body, all of which assimilate the intricate lines of Wells's collection.

The poetic persona describes the transcendence of grass and how the seeds of wheat have become an indispensable sustenance for humanity. As a result, every corner of the world offers a variety of bread, from Focaccia in Liguria and Tuscan loaves to the soft blaa of Waterford. Thus, “*She Gathers the Wild Grasses*” begins with the richness and abundance that grass has offered since the beginning of time. However, as the segments progress, the symbolism of the grass and the grass itself decline in the fourth segment: “Creeping,

Soft-grass, which begins / silken, tufted, packed, / only to dive into the abandon of branches-" (44). This is followed by the lord's prayer with the attempt to present the indispensable value of grass and its provenance across ages.

Significantly, Wells showcases, in the fifth and sixth segments, chemicals such as glyphosate which has severely affected terrestrial life. Consequently, not only plants suffer from these toxins, but also animals and humans. This can be seen through the description of the poetic persona's daughter, who suffers from the effects of glyphosate. Wells gives great examples of how humanity, in today's society, has poisoned the land and themselves with chemicals such as herbicides or pesticides to increase food production and above all, satisfy anthropocentric ends. The poetic persona retells accounts of children and women affected by this; how a child was born with a faulted heart because of "their mother's proximity to farmland. [...] *Mothers*, the report says, *share / their chemical load with the fetus. / One study found pregnant women / could come into contact / with 248 individual farm-chemicals*" (46).

The decay of the Earth mirrors not only the degenerative state of humans but also of animals. Wells presents examples of the non-human world suffering the consequences of the acts perpetrated by humanity. The poetic persona tells of fieldmice, voles, hares, a bewildered hedgehog, and wild creatures suffering from tumours and diseases. Hence, the trip to Italy has shifted from joyful images to impotent and intolerant descriptions of the human-centred world that surrounds and saddens the poetic persona gravely. Animals have to continue to endure these outrageous acts towards Mother Earth, who sustains all living beings. "I find in the darkness of my room / a firefly winking her intermittent light / at five the birds begin to sing again" (47).

Lastly, the poetic persona remembers a dozen curlews flying over her head as she walked along the beach at Kilmacreehy in May, but once she returns from Italy in June, they have disappeared. In "*She Gathers the Wild Grasses*", Wells does not only exemplify the worrisome condition of children and women but also of birds and animals that have become endangered species as a result of environmental threats caused by humanity. The very word *sanctuary* resonates at the end of the poem as an invitation to protect endangered species and preserve the world's wilderness. For Grace Wells, sanctuaries represent the spiritual peace which cannot be found in the chaos that the 'cultured' world implies. Hence, the presentation of nature as a sacred place indicates its value and need for protection against this anthropocentric society.

### 3.4 *Ocean, cliff and tide.*

In this section, Wells presents a poem entitled “*Banais Ríghi, the High King Speaks*”, which is divided into 4 parts and deals with the importance of the reconnection of the Irish people with Ireland herself and re-learning how to live. The poem stresses the interconnectedness and unity between humans and the natural world. In this sense, the individual and nature are one and they become intricate parts of each other. The male poetic persona describes how his marriage with the land encompasses not only the physical aspects of nature but also its spiritual and symbolic dimensions. The land is presented as a living entity through the Goddess Anu that interacts with the High King, offering her intricacies and bestowing upon him the qualities of various natural elements. The imagery of identification between the human and nonhuman world underscores the unity of all living beings. The High King becomes part of the natural landscape, undergoing growth, fertility, and transformation as a result of his union with the land.

Firstly, Wells showcases an introductory fragment written by Sean O Duinn, a monk of Glenstal Abbey. In this excerpt, O Duinn mentions the Goddess Anu, an Irish Goddess who according to Irish mythology would be the mother of Celtic Gods and the mother of Ireland. For this reason, Sean O Duinn states in this fragment that Cormac Mac Cuilleariáin held a High Kingship of Ireland and was a poetic voice of the ode.

The title speaks for itself “*Banais Ríghi*” means “the wedding of the kingship” referring to the king's union with the land and its people fertilised by the Goddess. This ancient ritual was the core of the royal inauguration and continues to be mentioned for many centuries in the literary tradition. The structure of “*Banais Ríghi, the High King Speaks*” itself is an ode, a poetic form that originated in ancient Greece and later was favoured among English romantic poets, who employed odes to express emotion by showcasing rich and descriptive language. According to the Oxford English Dictionary:

1. (a) In early use (esp. with reference to Ancient literature): a poem intended to be sung or one written in a form originally used for sung performance (e.g. the Odes of Pindar, of Horace, etc.). Cf. *Choral Odes n.* at CHORAL *adj.* 1 Compounds. (b) Later: a lyric poem, typically one in the form of an address to a particular subject, written in varied or irregular metre. Also in extended use.

Originally, Ode poems were performed in public to celebrate athletic victories but, in today's society, the term “Ode” is employed to describe any expression of praise. Therefore, modern Ode poems have evolved to encompass a wide range of styles and forms.

The poem depicts the land as a feminine entity, symbolised by the Goddess Anu. The poetic persona's relationship with the land is expressed in terms of a marriage or union, highlighting the intimate connection between the High King and the feminine essence of the land. The land is portrayed as the "Great Goddess" and the "mother of the gods," emphasising its nurturing and life-giving qualities. The poetic persona expresses adoration for the land, seeing its loveliest aspects and considering it their bridal bed.

Furthermore, Wells presents in "*Banais Ríghi, the High King Speaks*" ancient religious rituals that serve to have a supernatural and deep connection with the natural world in order to have a reciprocal relationship with the land and creatures as in the ceremony *feis*. In ancient Ireland, Gaels attached great importance to these local festivals, where they gathered to dance, sing, and play music, among other activities. The largest of these Gaelic festivals was the Aonach, a great festival of Tara, which was back then the city of the *Ardri* or "High King"

Moreover, in this poem, there are many repetitions expressing what nature grants and results in a cornucopia, that is, a symbol for abundance and prosperity: "apple blossom, birdsong, / the salmon's rainbow breast," (61). Likewise, the use of repetition and anaphora in the structure "When I married her, she gave me her intricacies" (61) serves to accentuate the intercourse between the King and the Goddess Earth. In addition, Wells employs plenty of metaphors in order to express this union since "*Banais ríghi*" is a metaphor itself. "When I married her, / I became the mountains, / I became the forest." (61), "The veins in my wrists/ became the rivers of the land" (62). Moreover, Wells employs similes such as "She released me / as a falcon on the wing" (62) indicating independence. Significantly, the presence of the incantatory quality of Gaelic words too: "*Tuath, Tuath, Tuath*" (63). The Gaelic word *Túath* can refer to both the geographical territory as well as the people who lived in that territory, thus it is very relevant in this poem because of its duality, and it resembles the union of the individual with their land and their people as though they were fused and were one.

Grace Wells's thought-provoking words highlight the significance of "*Tuath*" throughout her collection. She emphasizes the urgent need to restore harmony between people and the land, recognising that our fate is intertwined:

Tuath is also an echo for the whole collection. More than ever I feel people and place are one—except more in the sense of chaos, rather than the harmony we could share. By which I mean, the land is unwell, and the people are too. The great web of biodiversity is unravelling, collapsing. And people are under the same pressures. If the chemicals are in the land, they are in the people too. The soil sickens with toxins, and we sicken. In 'An account of that year in

fragments' I share how my daughter became unwell, and then I did too. Our lives are so close to the unwell earth now. But it could be different. And this era, this generation, we are the ones with the last chance, I think, to change, to bring the Tuath relationship back into harmony and balance. If we don't then clearly Climate Change and Biodiversity Collapse will prevail. We will bring about the end of our species and so many others. So we only have one choice now, to remember the closeness of people and place, and to look after place in every way we can, so that ultimately we look after ourselves and all other species too. (Wells 2023)

Moreover, Wells presents an ecocritical perspective on post-colonial Irish issues. Before England colonised Ireland, the Irish people had their own religion and cosmovision, which praised and respected nature meanwhile the English ways were based on the exploitation of natural resources and the colonisation of other people's lands. With time, this kind of relationship with nature was assimilated by the Irish people and it became part of their culture, but writers like Grace Wells are reintroducing and reclaiming the ancient Irish worldview.

As was aforementioned, this Irish cosmovision and religion are recreated through the figure of an Irish king. The High King, when assuming his role as ruler of Ireland, was instantly married to nature, the provider of his power: "It is my relationship with the land / which grants me sovereignty – / this ground our bridal bed" (62). Wells depicts the feminization of the land through metaphors and imagery, as nature is embodied in the figure of a female Goddess Anu, with whom the king sleeps in the religious ritual *Banais Ríghi*. In this sense, only the High King can have this kind of access to nature, as he is the highest representative of the Irish people before nature.

From a gendered perspective, "*Banais Ríghi, the High King Speaks*" depicts an interesting interaction between the High King and the figure of the land as the Goddess. As a result, the land is personified as a powerful and nurturing female entity and it is important to state that the King maintains a position of dominion and authority over her. This power interaction echoes a broader pattern of gendered oppression and control. The High King's union with the ground is described as a marriage, which traditionally also suggests a hierarchical relationship where the husband has authority over the wife. The land is portrayed as offering herself to the king, suggesting a passive position and a submissive agent. This depiction strengthens traditional gender roles and power imbalances, where women are often reified and expected to submit to male dominance. The King's transformation and empowerment through the union with the land can be glimpsed as an extension of patriarchal systems. As the High King

marries the land, he gains power, sovereignty, and various qualities associated with dominion. This poem depicts the notion that men derive their control and identity from subjugating and subordinating women in the context of the natural world. Moreover, this poem also exemplifies the land's position as a provider of offerings and abundance, which can be analysed as a form of appeasement for the exploitation and subjugation that endures. Significantly, the land offers her intricacies and natural resources to the King, which emphasises an interaction where women are expected to serve and provide for men's needs.

Overall Grace Wells brings ancient Irish traditions back to the 21st century as an attempt for a change in our modern nature-exploiting cosmovision. For this purpose, hybridity is manifested in this poem through the use of pre-colonial Irish beliefs as a tool to change what is wrong with the post-colonial ones. "*Banais Ríghi, the High King Speaks*" reflects a gendered power imbalance where the figure of the land as the Goddess Anu is depicted as a submissive entity, providing for the High King's desires and providing him authority. This portrayal aligns with historical practices of gender oppression, where women are often objectified, controlled, and expected to cater to men's demands and needs. By analysing these gender structures, the poem prompts a critical reflection on social configurations and the inherent inequality of dominion that perpetuates gender-based oppression

### **3.5 What the body holds.**

In this section, Wells presents a series of poems that illustrate the social paradigms that have been imposed on us even before we were born such as religion, patriarchy, historical movements, revolutions, imperialism and colonisation that have led to globalisation, capitalism, corruption and dictatorship. Consequently, all these factors have seriously buried the true origin, history, even language, and identity of the current individual; especially this intricate and intimate relationship with Mother Earth. Taken together, all of these circumstances have led to an ecological crisis that reflects the degenerative state of living beings through diseases such as cancer. In this way, this section showcases what the body has endured and undergone for ages without its consent.

Moreover, Wells celebrates the pre-Christian roots by mentioning the pagan culture, Celtic heritage such as Ireland's patron Saint Bridget (who is associated with the Irish goddess of fertility, healing and life) and lastly, the poetic voice's relationship to herself as she ages.

Grace Wells reflects on her search for her indigenous roots and the cosmovision that resonates with her. As an English person residing in Ireland, her life becomes intricate. Wells has dedicated considerable time to exploring Irish Celtic heritage, including its legends, stories, and festivals throughout the Celtic Year. Despite her love for this profound culture, she acknowledges that she cannot fully claim it as her own. Moreover, she finds it challenging to relate to English culture, particularly as she witnesses the global repercussions of British colonisation, which is amplified by her experience living in Ireland:

In 'Indigenous', I am trying to find the deep English culture that I would be indigenous to, in the same way the Irish can lean into Celtic heritage. For me to do that, I have to go on an archaeological exploration that takes me back long before the Romans, to a time when England had its own fusion of pagan cultures and practices. Carl Jung speaks of humans as being both modern and ancient simultaneously. For me there is something very helpful in relating to our indigenous nature if we are to tackle the environmental crisis. It is, I believe, our indigenous selves that can most easily act for the Earth, because this core elder within each of us, loves the Earth passionately—whereas the modern part of ourselves is en-webbed within culture and it can be more difficult for us to passionately advocate for the Earth if we are too embroiled within the modern world. (Wells 2023)

Particularly in "*Indigenous*", the poetic persona explores her childhood memories of a visit to Fishbourne Roman palace in Sussex with an opportunity to rethink her identity. This curiosity about the Earth and its provenance becomes archaeological, as the poetic persona reflects upon the life that surrounds her through ancient mosaics, metaphorically comparing their tesserae to the roots of leaves and trees. "No longer native of anywhere, I sift / archaeologies to feel a root [...] Leaves build like tesserae to make a tree, / bird is an opus of feather, beak, eye and more" (69). Although the poetic persona was a child who had no knowledge of the creation of the world "I was a child staring at where history began, / not yet knowing how her world was made," (69), she became aware of the cultural displacement and uprooting of the world. Likewise, she wonders "what lay beneath that floor –a Celtic inheritance, / the sacred names and nature of place, a lost linguistics" (69). This is a moment of epiphany for the poetic persona, where she discovers that despite the Roman civilisation, the natural world and this Celtic origin are able to resurface through the cracks and details of these ancient relics, "but being pagan, I expect they understood / how nature conjures herself from detail" (69), thus finding a mighty ecological message.

Interestingly, Wells gives a glimpse at how the Romans, with the acquisition of Christianity, banished the pagan world and erased their beliefs. The Christians from the first century began with the persecution of pagan culture, demolishing their temples, vandalising their statues,

cutting down their sacred groves, scattering their libraries and burning books. Likewise, that strong connection with the spirits of place and nature was buried and replaced by this monotheistic religion, which has recognised a single God and has represented an ‘evolution’ in human history. Significantly, it has brought with it an unnatural uprooting and displacement from the world as well as forgetfulness of the sacred nature within creation. However, this split did not occur in cultures such as indigenous traditions, which retained their beliefs. The poetic persona relates how these developments through Roman art have hidden the Celtic ethnic, culture, language and the sacredness of natural places. Hence, underneath all these layers of history, the poetic persona finds herself (her pure identity) and this deep interrelatedness to Mother Earth “my own dear, indigenous heart.” (60).

Grace Wells discusses that England has experienced colonisation and the development of a warrior culture, causing harm globally. In Ireland, while criticism towards Britain exists, the shared cultural heritage and neolithic cosmology are often forgotten, including standing stones, stone circles, dolmen, and various artistic and trading practices:

Personally, I find it helpful to look at what we have in common, rather than to keep stressing what divides us. I realise that is simplistic, and I do not mean to negate Irish history in any way. I do however believe there is something indigenous within us all that we need to excavate—for ultimately it was in our earliest cultures that we viewed the Earth as sacred, and that is what we need to get back to if we are to save life on Earth as we know it. (Wells 2023)

In "*Indigenous*", Grace Wells explores childhood memories at Fishbourne Roman palace, sparking reflections on cultural displacement and the resurfacing of Celtic heritage. The poetic persona does not only become aware of the cultural displacement and uprooting of the world, but she is also able to connect with her own indigenous root, which empowers her to act more fiercely for the natural world. Wells stresses the Roman suppression of pagan beliefs and the consequent disconnection from the natural world. Wells contemplates on her personal quest for indigenous roots and the necessity to reconnect with our core selves to address the ecological crisis. This poem highlights the love for the Earth that lives within our core selves while recognising the challenges posed by our contemporary entanglement with culture.

### **3.6 Psalm**

Grace Wells commemorates this section with “*An account of that year in fragments*” as a psalm in praise of life and the natural world that surrounds the poetic persona through a series of experiences of serious illnesses and hardships. For this purpose, before beginning the

analysis of the poem, it would be convenient to introduce the meaning of a ‘Psalm’ from the Oxford dictionary in order to assimilate the healing and comforting message that Wells presents through this poem turned into a psalm:

“**2. gen.** (esp. in biblical use). A sacred song that is or may be sung in religious worship. Later also: any song or poem of a sacred or serious nature.” (“psalm”)

The poetic voice goes through two overlapping health crises beginning with her daughter's fragile health condition and then with her own. As a result, the poem delves into the depths of fear and grief, while simultaneously counterpointing these intense emotions with the subtlety and tender beauty of nature that envelops the poetic persona throughout. The evolution of the poetic voice is almost palpable to the point of conveying memorable and powerful emotions that have arisen in the face of tragedy, as Wells exemplifies: “And I can hold off the doctor / telling my girl it's likely to be cancer [...] *It is hard to be patient in an emergency* [...] For a moment I give these problems / back to the One that brought them / and try to turn instead to praise. [...] I try so hard to hear the one within me / delirious with love for the world.” (83).

Moreover, Wells uses metaphors to set pain against beauty: “There is a dragonfly on these rivers which in flight appears bat-black / but on opening her wings becomes emerald green” (82). Likewise, an explicit reference to Ireland commonly known as the Emerald Isle, and to the love that the poetic voice treasures in her for this land.

As for the rhetorical devices, Wells depicts the personification of non-human characters to highlight the presence of nature, which offers refuge and a serenity to the poetic voice in the face of what she is going through: “but the rain and the open window have / carried its salt-breath inland, / I sit down into it, and am held.” (82)

Intriguingly, this poem exhibits parallels with “*She Gathers the Wild Grasses*”, as both poems feature a poetic persona who keenly observes a multitude of grass blades, meticulously describing them as “speedwell, valerian, herb Robert, / bird's foot trefoil, purple vetch, wild thyme [...] What kind of creatures are we that all this is not enough” (83). This extensive variety of life showcased in the natural world highlights the rich tapestry of existence. Nonetheless, it also conveys a sense of disappointment, as the persona ponders the

insufficiency of such abundance, suggesting that human beings often fail to appreciate their surroundings, prioritising self-interest instead.

This time, Wells is not only concerned with the environmental crisis, but also with the mental health crisis that individuals experience in Western culture. The poetic persona wakes up at night in the dark distressed about the health of her daughter, who has to undergo treatments and surgeries. Wells portrays dreams as a place for confession to depict repressed emotions, drawing back in time to Viking exploration, past battles and works of art such as the Madonna and child that symbolise the figure of the son as a sign of hope and salvation. Thus, these anxieties and grief turn into praise, especially, when the poetic persona renounces these obscure fears and finds light in every manifestation of nature. In this way, instances of light from the natural world such as the mere sunlight, the glow of a stream and the light that leaps back into her daughter's eyes guide the poetic persona to a journey of healing.

Furthermore, Grace Wells employs literary devices such as zoomorphism by attributing non-human animal traits to the poetic persona. In this sense, Wells compares the emotional state of the poetic persona with the wild nature of Mother Earth. "And try to tame my nervous-system / which is running animal-wild with fear / Now, Sunlight come with me, / Now Beech-leaves stay at my side, / Stream water, flow on through my mind." (84). One can appreciate the maternal love and care of a mother towards her daughter in the midst of the threats brought by the Western world, and simultaneously, this mirrors the ecological crisis that Mother Earth faces at present. Thus, Wells's lines can also be considered as a pathetic fallacy since the state of the world reflects the poetic persona's emotions. Likewise, Wells employs juxtapositions to stress the poetic persona's grief through lines such as "When medicine looks like violence" (85). However, the language of nature can embellish these sufferings, and later they can turn into holy offerings and praise, especially, after her daughter's recovery, which enhances the tone of the poem turned into a psalm.

Subsequently, the second health crisis occurs when the poetic persona reflects on the cyst that has arisen in her pelvis. Nonetheless, the poetic persona accepts it firmly, knowing the moments of fear and uncertainty that will come with the possibility of having cancer. "Oh pelvis you've grown a small ocean, / the way our seas are swollen with patches of oil" (86).

Hence, Wells employs a metaphor comparing the cyst in the poetic persona's pelvis with the ocean swelling with oil slicks in order to show the difficult responsibility of saving the non-human world and the human world. In this sense, the acute urgency can be seen to act as soon as possible before a disease such as cancer, which can rapidly spread throughout the body and metastasises, in the same way, that oil liquids and all types of pollution can spread throughout the ocean reaching the point where marine life cannot be saved. Wells makes this comparison, as the need to address these issues becomes paramount.

Moreover, “*An account of that year in fragments*” presents lines that describe very well the process of pain that a person may experience before a malignant disease such as cancer. At present, most individuals have a hard time processing grief, especially, due to the stressful demands of Western culture, whereby Wells's message is one of acceptance of vulnerability with an attempt to avoid repression of emotions. Hence, in order to feel wholeness, one has to let these feelings flow like a stream of water in order to cope with the process of grief and fall gently into it. “Oh cyst, you’re a crystal ball and all I can see / are more doctors and clinical rooms / the pathos of perishability ./ my own and other people's / if this wind keeps us, these branches / will crack in front of me, and perhaps they must. / Sometimes we do just have to stare / into the face of tragedy” (86). In Western culture, embracing vulnerability is a significant challenge. We often neglect addressing vulnerability and providing proper care for various groups, as Grace Wells states:

The acceptance of vulnerability is incredibly difficult within Western culture, partly because we do not as a society really work to address vulnerability and care properly for the elderly, the unwell, those with special needs, even pregnant women, babies, creatures. Rather than embracing vulnerability as a key element of life that we could gyre our societies around, we tend to do the opposite, and create societies, buildings, urban landscapes, for the able bodied, the physically fit, and increasingly towards the elite. Many of the old cities of Europe are becoming ghettos for the über rich, while the poor are being pushed further and further out into the suburbs and deeper into an underclass. (Wells 2023)

Instead of embracing vulnerability, we manage to flee from it. In instances of vulnerability, like the experiences described in the poem, society continually fails to provide adequate aid. Rather, individuals may feel excluded and further marginalised, intensifying their fragility while grappling with limited access to medical assistance, costly healthcare options, and insufficient counselling services.

Mental health is part of this. There is a huge expectation that we will all accept and embrace our strange society with its rampant capitalism, and thrive within this space. But the only way to thrive is to shut down one’s sensitivity. Most young people can’t do this. It isn’t healthy for them to do

so. So they struggle to find themselves and find their place in this strange, compromised world. Most artists can't shut down their sensitivity. It is essential that they do not. So instead of shutting down, sensitive people become more mentally vulnerable. It's tragic really. Krishnamurti said "It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society." I agree with this. (Wells 2023)

What is more, the poetic persona attempts to bring back encounters and anecdotes from the non-human world to the hospital where she is to be admitted. A great example is at Eagle's rock, one of the most outstanding and awe-inspiring rock formations in County Leitrim and one of the highest free-standing rock towers in Ireland. "The cliff obscured in cloud until yards from the holy-well, / the sun broke through, and the mist suddenly lifted" (87). These memories fill the poetic persona with serenity and resilience in front of the medical procedures she has to undergo such as anaesthesia. In addition, the warm company of each of her friends and family members, who visit her, turns this situation into a hospital picnic. Wells employs rhetorical figures such as a simile "And Dave comes to sit on the hard plastic chair, making the years of our friendship solid in the room". Likewise, the use of metaphors to underline the abundance of love the poetic voice is receiving "And Ursula drives across two countries, [...] so by the medicine of friendship I mend" (88).

Furthermore, the poetic voice embraces the word *Benign*, nevertheless, this very word carries positive and negative connotations since it has also brought with it harsh diagnoses and medical treatments that the poetic persona has been exposed to over this year. Hence, Wells employs wordplays of medical terms that juxtapose with the botanical terms she has utilised throughout every poem: "The gynaecologist reeling off at me hysterectomy, Oophorectomy, salpingectomy, trachelectomy." (88). The poetic persona abhors the idea of having to undergo these surgical procedures to remove her uterus due to the fact that she considers her womb as something sacred: "But I wouldn't sign their form. *My womb / has psycho-spiritual significance*, I said in my paper-gown [...] *And if you do have to take it, I'll want it back afterwards*, / I said, thinking of a burial in the woods / *No*, he says. *It would go to oncology. / Our body our own until it isn't*" (88). Grace Wells as an ecofeminist poet reinforces the idea that women carry an essential and indispensable connection to nature, as both agents have been subordinated by man's domination through centuries. Wells's empowering purpose is to enhance female embodiment and critique to the androcentric society to which women and the non-human world have been subjected, as Huggan and Tiffin exemplified:

Such associations have also determined women's inferiority to men, since women have been thought closer to nature, particularly through such bodily activities as childbirth and child rearing [...] Indeed, it is now commonplace to suggest that women and colonised subjects have been identified with the body and the animalistic, while the 'natural' supremacy of men – and, by extension, male colonisers – is evidenced by their apparent transcendence of the body. (188)

Hence, Wells vehemently denounces both the aggression towards nature and the oppression of women. One of the central themes analysed in Wells's poetry is the portrayal of the body, depicting it as both the 'colonised' utilitarian and the exploited female figure of Mother Earth, both agents that become reified within this anthropocentric society.

Furthermore, even though the poetic voice has been exposed to treatments and therapies, there is always a way to immerse herself in the non-human world that offers restoration and recovery. As we saw in the beginning of Wells's collection and the previous poem "*She Gathers the Wild Grasses*", songbirds resonate throughout this poem as well and accompany the poetic voice in each phase of grief and healing. Likewise, Wells employs metaphors to compare songbirds as a therapy for the poetic voice "I take their notes into my tissue, / absorb their therapy." (89).

Moreover, Wells refers to Shinzan Miyamae Roshi, a Buddhist teacher who offered important contributions to the fundamental teachings of impermanence. This Buddhist doctrine seeks harmony and balance through the empirical truth that every living thing can arise and pass away, which is an intrinsic characteristic of life. Buddhist practices can aid individuals to reflect on the world and channel those sufferings of resisting the natural flow of the transience of life, as zen Buddhist and activist Nhất Hạnh said:

Impermanence and selflessness are not negative aspects of life, but the very foundations on which life is built. Impermanence is the constant transformation of things. Without impermanence, there can be no life. Selflessness is the interdependent nature of all things. Without interdependence, nothing could exist. (Hạnh 32)

This is Grace Wells's philosophy as well and she clearly expresses it through the lines of "*An account of that year in fragments*" by enhancing the fundamental interdependence and interrelatedness between living beings and nature. This poem is recited as a psalm and a song to the natural world and life, as the poetic voice is able to overcome in one year hard illnesses and exhausting hardships that her daughter and herself were exposed to. Nonetheless, these

tragic mishaps are transformed into praises and blessings by finding shelter in nature and connecting with the non-human world that surrounds the poetic persona in every fragment. In addition, "*An account of that year in fragments*" responds gently to "*She Gathers the Wild Grasses*" especially when the poetic persona states at the very end: "Yarrow I set, beneath the orchard I planted / Not polluted, not drenched in glyphosates. / Beneath the bird's weight, the stalk, / curves and bends. The goldfinch lifts free / Come nature, help me voice this psalm. / Come nature, who knows how long either of us has" (90). Therefore, Grace Wells takes it upon herself to share an urgent ecological message by giving voice to the non-human world and by enhancing the indispensable interrelationship between living beings and Mother Earth.

### ***3.7 In wonder and in grief.***

Grace Wells culminates her work with one of the most memorable poems of all, entitled "Cill Ghrá an Domhain", whose very title in Gaelic signifies: Cill: church; Ghrá: love; Domhain: world. The Gobnait's chapel alludes to the church in the title of the poem as well as the title of Wells's poetry collection. These Gaelic words stress the intimate interconnection between land and people, which is the premise of the entire collection: Domhain means universe, Earth, and its people as well.

It is important to note that St. Gobnait's Church is situated in the Northern part of Inisheer, in the Aran Islands, Ireland, Galway. Wells portrays this renowned Gobnait, an Irish saint closely associated with bees: Saint Gobnait is one of the most beloved local female saints, and her feast is celebrated on 11th February, which has been included in the national calendar of Ireland. As for the history of the church, the place is believed to have been in active use ever since the 6th century. According to traditional stories, Saint Gobnait fled from County Clare to Inisheer in order to flee a family dispute. Afterwards, Gobnait witnessed the manifestation of an angel, who told her to return to the mainland and head south until she saw nine white deer; then she settled in Ballyvourney and established a religious community there. The remnants of her beehive cell are believed to be at Inisheer, and the stone church was probably constructed in the 11th or 12th century.

“*Cill Ghrá an Domhain*” showcases ecological and mental health concerns and profoundly reflects on the state of the outer world and correlates it with the current individual's inward state by portraying the crisis of nature and humanity at present. In this manner, the deterioration of the Earth mirrors the depression that the poetic persona suffers from, who takes a trip to the Aran Islands, retelling the creation of the world back in time. Hence, the beauty and the atrocities on Earth are witnessed across the ages through the poetic persona's worldview. Grace Wells converts the whole poem into a metaphor in itself through a navigation and exploration into the depths of emotions fraught with grief and awe before the natural world. Wells places special emphasis on the notion of a cycle of time by describing the beginning through prehistoric traditions attached to nature, and the possible ending through our nature-exploiting cosmovision.

“*Cill Ghrá an Domhain*” is divided into 8 main parts, where the poetic persona travels westwards to encounter the wonders of nature in order to rehabilitate her wounded soul, which mirrors the damaged state of the world. In the first part, the poem begins in a neutral tone with the embarkation of the poetic persona on a spiritual journey of growth and rehabilitation. “It's late season, the far end of summer, / just past the equinox, a day of squall, / when finally we take the ferry to the Aran islands.” (93). As can be observed, the poetic persona has planned a voyage that had been postponed with her friend Ursula “We've been talking of doing this for years. The islands / always out there on our horizon, a trinity of shapes. / So often just three shadows risen from a dark sea” (93). In the second part, the journey continues on land and the poetic persona recalls childhood memories about Ursula. This friendship of mutual understanding and complicity has helped the poetic persona through her healing process “As friends, we've been companions in wonder / and in grief, the pair of us wearing our century.” (94)

In the third part, Wells alludes to the church of her poetry collection “Gobnait's chapel [...] but its name follows us, finds me anyway: / *Cill Ghrá an Domhain*, the church of the love of the world. / *Domhain* meaning the Earth, and also its people, it's countries and / wonders. / *Domhain* also meaning depth, deeply embedded, deeply / committed. Hence, this Gobnait is depicted throughout the poem as a medieval and feminine Irish saint. Therefore, in the fourth part, the poetic persona starts to talk to Gobnait about the degeneration of mankind. This part covers the internal struggles of the poetic persona as to her mental health. “People who suffer

/ from depression have less capacity to deny the state of the world” (94). The depression the poetic persona suffers is compared to the awareness of the inexorable collapse of the environment. Hence, the enumeration of ecological catastrophes to exemplify the universal damage on Earth:

on Monday I read of  
the heat dome building over America,

on Tuesday, flash-flooding in Germany  
has killed 100 people,

on Wednesday, Siberia’s fire have released in days  
America’s entire carbon output for a year,

Thursday brings word of mysterious  
spike in methanol levels,

on Friday a third of California’s coastal sea-lions  
have cancer.

And round it goes again, on Monday I read  
the Amazon rainforest emits more carbon than it sequesters.

on Tuesday I hear two million Chinese people  
have been displaced by flooding

On Wednesday I see the floating island of plastic  
That drifts perpetually through the Bermuda triangle.

On Thursday I’ll be told, on Friday I’ll read  
And round it goes again.

Oh Gobnait, you’d weep to see what we’ve done to your world

The storm finally hits the scene, the neutral view has been erased and has ascended to a fatalistic view of the world. The poetic person drowns in this cycle of pessimism and apocalyptic view. Thus, one notices all the damage that humanity as a whole has done to the Earth. These atrocities and calamities perpetuated by the human-centric view consume the poetic voice. Therefore, the poem as a whole indicates the use of pathetic fallacy to illustrate the journey of depression by adding feelings and senses to explain the poetic persona’s condition correlated to the state of the world.

What is more, Wells denounces Western indifferent and frivolous attitude towards natural monuments “All day the tourists swarm over Dún Aonghasa’s / stone amphitheatre like ants in erratic lines of quest, / phones and selfies diminishing the spirits-of-place. [...] our crisis of human values, nature’s collapse / the manifestation of our mistaken ethics” (96). Dún Aonghasa and its Gaelic name meaning ‘Fort of Aonghas’, it is one of the best-known

prehistoric hill forts on the Aran Islands, county of Galway in Ireland. These hill forts are located on Inis Mór at the edge of a cliff 100 metres high. Dún Aonghasa may make reference to pre-Christian Gods of Irish mythology or to the king Aonghus mac Úmhór. Hence, the poetic persona states that the tourists lack respect for the spirit of the place that this monument houses, and thus, this collapses with human values and nature.

Furthermore, Wells employs Latin terms such as “Homo sapiens”, “Homo economicus”, and “Homo indigene” (96), and this last mention is an irony since the indigenous people were the group of people that this process of “civilisation” completely erased from their lands. In truth, indigenous people were the ones who really preserved the natural world, unlike the colonisers that have come to their lands to exploit nature. This part entails that humankind’s self-destruction can be avoided unless individuals are able to recover and restore this mutual relationship of the spirit of place with nature that existed before.

In the fifth part of “Cill Ghrá an Domhain”, the poetic persona sees the sunset at Dún Aonghasa and reflects on the past of the land. “In the stillness of sunset, Dún Aonghasa’s stone-temple / has become a wild sanctuary framing endless sea and sky [...] The last rays of sun spill a path of liquid gold across / the surface of the ocean. I have no words for such benevolence / All around gull cry and beauty. / How limitless it is, our capacity to love” (96) In this way, the declaration of love and solicitude for nature. This part is noteworthy due to the realisation of the sacredness that this stone temple offers, and the abundance of love before the benevolence that the natural world evokes.

In the sixth part, the poetic persona retells how in prehistoric times, ancient cultures praised a variety of Gods through the form of nature herself. “And nothing more lovely than this journey to the Earth. / The same Earth, I keep saying, as the Medievals saw, / same as the Vikings knew when they named their Gods / for thunder and for spring. Same as Gobnait praised / when she built *Cill Ghrá an Domhain*.” (97). In addition, the poetic persona denounces how this current society represses their inconvenient emotions in Western culture due to the imposed narrative that has been set before we were born “How it matters so much now that we know / what our culture makes us stow way. / *its* shadow letting us deny our harm, / and just as easily subvert any inconvenient emotion.” (97).

In the seventh part, salient attention is given to the rites of ancient peoples who inhabited this land, aiming to reconnect with our roots, Mother Earth, and denounce these shadows. The

poetic persona experiences a relapse in terms of feelings in the face of the forgetfulness of the sacredness of places and our roots, which were attached to Mother Earth:

In the falling twilight I clamber back downhill. A grey dusk, grey stone descent. Each uneven step / hastening me towards humanity's denouement / The spell of our narrative nears its end [...] night has already swallowed the Caileach's hills, Hag's Head / and the Burren with its ancient sacred caves/ Caves so dark the other senses compensate for blindness, / hearing becomes acute, touch a small rapture / Caves of sparse relic and votive offering: antler, / oyster shell, amber rings from the Baltic sea, / a wolf's pierced and worn as a totem at the neck. / I carry them, or they carry me over the stumbling rocks- / something- as I head on into the falling night. (98)

Nonetheless, this relapse does not last long since realisation hits and the true revival begins once the poetic persona asks Gobnait for help and confesses her love for the world from the very beginning of the poem. Wells employs a variety of imagery such as the figure of Gobnait “ Oh Gobnait, I'll not be denied my love affair with the world” (94), underlining the poetic voice's wish to restore balance with nature. Wells employs similes to stress this idea “Like a wounded thing I keep trying to shelter” and metaphors “saving small white feathers / to line a fragile nest” (95) that lie on the persistent notion of danger and grief associated with the loss of nature altogether, as it gradually succumbs to destruction over time. However, in the last part, towards the end of the journey, there is a glimmer of hope and redemption “Gobnait, if I could do anything at all, I'd brave my arm/ into our dark, the way prehistoric women once put their hands into the bees-nest bole of trees to draw out honey.” (98) As an ecofeminist writer, Wells vindicates the place of women and nature, since both agents have been reified through ages. The poetic persona rehabilitates herself and denounces the shadow by acknowledging our ability to love and our responsibility to save Mother Earth “So help me Gobnait. All that's left to us now, / is to pull from our *shadow* our fierce love for the world, *lá dheireadh an domhain* – until the end of time” (98). These sincere emotions cannot be described as they are merged in the sublime. Hence, Grace Wells employs Gaelic words to enhance this idea and foretells salvation and redemption through the process of renewal and restoration with Mother Earth.

In general terms, most stanzas are end-stopped with some punctuation marks. As the poem deals with an amount of imagery and enjambments, which are also present in order to enhance the connection: “on Tuesday, flash-flooding in Germany / has killed 100 people” (95). Likewise, Wells employs alliterations in some stanzas, which highlight the meaning of the poem such as “feathers-fragile-fray”, and in the following stanzas: “flash-flooding -fires” insist on the idea that nature is in danger constantly. The magnitude of imagery in this poem is

exemplified by the presence of Saint Gobnait, symbolising the vastness of the universe. Thus, the poem abounds with intricate sound patterns and alliterations such as “rust, ruined, ru”, and reverse rhyme “rust-ruined, run-aground”. Interestingly, some sentences continue in the following stanza, for instance, “We have reached the world's end and must turn again, / ours is a crisis of human values, nature’s collapse” (96). The pause allows for reflection on these words and they are to be read with solemnity.

In “*Cill Ghrá an Domhain*”, Grace Wells invites the individual to reflect on the idea of embracing one’s moral and ethical responsibility within the context of collective consciousness. The intention is to restore this communion and connection with Mother Earth, indicating a new rebirth and a sense of hope for humanity through our capacity to love.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The objective of this dissertation was to explore the interrelationship between the individual and the natural world through Grace Wells’s *The Church of the Love of the World*. Grace Wells exemplifies through her sequences of poems how Western culture has disengaged human beings from the degradation and demise of Mother Earth. One of the most substantial premises that Grace Wells presents is to recover this interdependent spiritual connectedness to the natural world in order to survive as a species and to avoid our own self-destruction by attacking this organism known as Mother Earth. As an ecofeminist writer, Wells also offers alternative discourses, which meet post-anthropological and posthumanist principles, in order to denounce traditional dualities, gender dichotomies and to deconstruct these social paradigms that have been imposed over time. On the basis of Irish history, mythology, and language, this exploration aims to reconnect individuals with the land and their ancestral identity. It highlights that since ancient times, their identity was closely intertwined with nature. The portrayal of the Irish ethnicity serves as a global example to vindicate ethics of responsibility, care and environmental justice, which can function as a guiding model for other countries worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic that wiped out the lives of many human beings was possibly caused by this imbalance between nature and anthropogenic advances. Wells presents in her poetry clear examples of how the contemporary world is becoming increasingly unbalanced and, thus, the urgent task of regaining that connection with nature based on the profound

understanding of the Earth as a sacred organism. Nonetheless, in order to heal this relationship and restore the balance with the Earth, we have to reach that mutual understanding in our consciousness by knowing the root of the problem, which lies in the spiritual disconnection from nature in contemporary Western society. *The Church of the Love of the World* presents the spiritual crisis and the wounded soul of the poetic female persona by comparing her condition to the spiritual unbalanced in the world and the current ecological crisis with an attempt to demonstrate the state of the unhealthiness of both the human world and the non-human world.

This spiritual crisis has led to the forgetfulness of the sacred nature within creation since globalisation and Western contemporary culture have detached individuals from the history of the sacred that belongs to the Earth and this interdependent and respected co-dwelling existence among living beings, which is indispensable and fundamental to prevail as species. This human-centric view has regarded Earth merely as a resource to be exploited and poisoned to satisfy these human-centric materialistic values and interests. Wells expresses these aspects and maintains that Mother Earth must be revered and protected as a whole living being since her poetry demonstrates that humanity should not have dominion over other living beings. To this end, it is pertinent to quote a passage from the Bible to illustrate how this notion has brought about an unnatural uprooting and displacement from the world:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. / So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. [...] and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (*Genesis 1 Bible*, 1:26-27)

This passage has legitimised an orientation of control upon nature since 'dominion' is viewed as the entitlement to rule and exercise absolute power over the whole Earth. It can be argued that some Christians have interpreted the Bible in a literal sense according to their convenience, as they have held the belief that humanity has been given the right to exploit natural resources for anthropocentric benefits; instead of assuming the responsibility and guardianship to protect the Earth. With time, this monotheistic religion has buried this relentless connection with nature that ancient cultures respected and venerated. In general terms, this notion of 'dominion' over other species has generated our nature-exploiting cosmovision of dominating and subduing the Earth.

As an ecofeminist and eco-spiritual writer, Grace Wells offers reflections on the ideologies and hierarchical structures that have separated realms such as the human world versus the non-human world that predominate in today's Western society. Grace Wells reflects her preoccupation within this era of biodiversity and climate crisis and denounces these anthropogenic relationships towards the non-human world. The detachment from the natural world might have given humanity advances in science and technology but has caused a fragmentation and alienation in our contemporary society, which has left us without any instinctive connection to the spiritual dimension of the natural world and life: that connection between the human soul and the soul of the world, and the fundamental knowledge that all living beings are part of a single, spiritual and whole living organism, who is Mother Earth. As poet Grace Well points out:

I would just say that my sense is that nature, the Unconscious, the World Soul, and what we call "God" are all one and the same (...) we need to create as many sanctuaries as possible. Sanctuaries for the birds and creatures, the plants and the oceans, and we need to build sanctuaries for ourselves, buildings, communities artworks, music, and places where the World Soul within each of us can thrive. We need territories that can still, calm, and soothe us, places where we can reconnect to self-hood, and a rededication to being here. Places where we can fall in love with our lives all over again. ("Culture and Nature")

In her poetry, Wells presents the Earth as a living agent to raise awareness of the urgent need to heal the damaged body and the wounded soul of Mother Earth due to human exploitation and desecration. The poetic persona affirms her love for the world in the face of environmental collapse, as love is the cure to heal what humanity has desecrated and destroyed. Love can open the way to a deep engagement with life, it can invite us to acknowledge the sacred and reconnect with the divine that is present in every element of nature. In this sense, we can become aware of the unity of life and reflect on how our actions on an individual level affect our global environment both outward and inward. Grace Wells's *The Church of the Love of the World* is a balm to the soul, inviting us to find belonging and sanctuary in our psyche, body, culture and nature. Above all, the objective is to recover a sense of wholeness with the Earth by returning to our own roots, embracing rootedness and forging a connection with that sacred wholeness. The reconnection and reverence with the more-than human-world are what will lead us to our own survival and the restoration of the balance in the world.

*The Church of the Love of the World* encompasses the intricate relationship between individuals and nature as a way to address urgent ecological concerns. Grace Wells, as an eco-poet and environmental writer, stresses the need to reconnect with the natural world in the face of ecological breakdown. Wells draws inspiration from Irish culture and history, incorporating Gaelic words and highlighting the significance of land, language, and storytelling. Wells's work is grounded in the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, which envelops various standpoints such as ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and eco-spirituality to shed light on environmental justice and challenge Western society's exploitative cosmovision towards nature. Through her poetry, Wells calls for the protection of Mother Earth and seeks to awaken a sense of ecological and feminist consciousness in her readers. *The Church of the Love of the World* delves into themes of grief, wonder, and resilience, weaving together personal experiences, lessons and reflections on history and on the Earth. Grace Wells's poetry collection invites individuals to reestablish their connection with nature and recognise the inherent interconnectedness between human beings and the natural world.

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## Appendix

### Interview with Grace Wells

❖ It is interesting to note the feminisation of agriculture in “She Gathers the Wild Grasses” through lines “and I remember how it was women / who gathering the first grasses / and scattering their seed, / became the earliest farmers– / inventing an agriculture / that brought the nomadic tribes / to rest”. I would like to know a little bit about this poem from a gender perspective.

“In the last few years I have thought a lot about the term ‘man and nature’, and how we almost never hear the term ‘woman and nature’. I am very curious to know more about the relationship that women can have with nature. It feels to me to be a profoundly wise relationship, and I suppose I am looking at that relationship in this poem. In different ways. I am meditating on the many different things I know about women and grass. It begins with my simply touching and gathering the grasses. And moves through very many relations: women & children hungry because Western farming methods have used too much glyphosate and caused high gluten intolerance, which led people, often women, to buy grains that were not wheat, like quinoa, which led the prices of those staple foods to become impossibly high, so women starved. As I touch the grasses, I meditate on all the impacts ‘man and nature’ has on ‘women and nature’. I mention a woman whose child is born with a damaged heart, and how a pregnant woman’s proximity to farmland is the one of the primary causes of infant heart defects. Largely I think the poem speaks about how it is to be a woman living within a patriarchal world. Of course, women can have careers and material object and many concrete ‘equalities’. But what of the natural world that we have inherited and are relating to? This sense of ‘woman and nature’ is largely already defined by what man has done, and continues to do to nature. And yet it was women who first invented agriculture, who first learned about seeds and grasses and grain. I suppose the poem seeks to ask women to become that engaged and powerful within their relationship to nature, all over again, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century manner”.

❖ In “Grass” and “She Gathers the Wild Grasses”. Does the symbol of grass entail a transcendental role and resonate with the rest of the poems?

“Interestingly, I think in ‘Grass’ there is less of a transcendental role, than there is in ‘She Gathers the Wild Grasses’, where early on I refer to temples, and connect grass to ancient spirituality. Also, as my own hand reaches for the grasses, and my thoughts focus on the grasses, I am drawn to speak of that which I find holy in nature. But in ‘Grass’, when I say ‘where it all begins’, I really mean so much of the earthly life, so much literally begins down in the grass. The insects, the ants, the butterflies among the dandelions, the beginnings of grain on which we all depend. On which world economies depend. So much is rooted down in the grass, so it’s not so much transcendental in ‘Grass’, as an absolute necessity for life, all life in a very practical way. But yes in ‘She Gathers the Wild Grasses’, I am moving closer all the time to the transcendental nature of grass, and its role in my life as a source of the sacred. And yes, this resonates with many of the other poems, where in different ways, I am trying to name the sacred within nature, without necessarily overtly saying that. Instead, I often reveal small revelations, small moments of divinity experienced within the natural world.”

❖ For me, the Gaelic word “Tuath” is relevant in “Banais Ríghi, the High King Speaks” for the sense of unity that it bestows. Is it also an echo for your whole collection? “Tuath, Tuath, Tuath meaning people, meaning place”.

“Yes, it the word Tuath is also an echo for the whole collection. More than ever I feel people and place are one—except more in the sense of chaos, rather than the harmony we could share. By which I mean, the land is unwell, and the people are too. The great web of biodiversity is unravelling, collapsing. And people are under the same pressures. If the chemicals are in the land, they are in the people too. The soil sickens with toxins, and we sicken. In ‘An account of that year in fragments’ I share how my daughter became unwell, and then I did too. Our lives are so close to the unwell earth now. But it could be different. And this era, this generation, we are the ones with the last chance, I think, to change, to bring the Tuath relationship back into harmony and balance. If we don’t then clearly Climate Change and Biodiversity Collapse will prevail. We will bring about the end of our species and so many others. So we only have one choice now, to remember the closeness of people and place, and to look after place in every way we can, so that ultimately we look after ourselves and all other species too”.

❖ I would be thrilled to know more about the creation and elaboration of your poem “Indigenous”. Is this poem an archaeological exploration that the poetic voice embarks on? Does she become aware of the cultural displacement and uprooting of the world?

“These two questions relate to one another in a way, as in my poem ‘Indigenous’, I am trying to find what I am indigenous too. Where are my deepest roots, and where is the cosmovision that I most relate to? As an English person living in Ireland life is complex for many reasons. I have spent much of my life exploring Irish Celtic heritage, the legends and stories of this place, and the Celtic Year with its festivals. Much as I love all this deep culture, I can not claim it as my own. But I also don’t relate to much within English culture—all the more so because living in Ireland I see the harm the British caused worldwide with their colonisations. In ‘Indigenous’, I am trying to find the deep English culture that I would be indigenous to, in the same way the Irish can lean into Celtic heritage. For me to do that, I have to go on an archaeological exploration that takes me back long before the Romans, to a time when England had its own fusion of pagan cultures and practices. Carl Jung speaks of humans as being both modern and ancient simultaneously. For me there is something very helpful in relating to our indigenous nature if we are to tackle the environmental crisis. It is, I believe, our indigenous selves that can most easily act for the Earth, because this core elder within each of us, loves the Earth passionately—whereas the modern part of ourselves is en-webbed within culture and it can be more difficult for us to passionately advocate for the Earth if we are too embroiled within the modern world. In the poem, rather than becoming aware of the cultural displacement and uprooting of the world, I am able to connect with my own indigenous root, which empowers me to act more fiercely for the natural world”.

❖ I was moved by analysing “An account of that year in fragments”. I think this poem encompasses vital issues such as the importance of mental health and the acceptance of vulnerability. I would like to know a little bit more about your views regarding these issues that should be relevant in contemporary society.

“So having said all that, when I look again at your previous question, I have to agree with you, yes, it’s all true. But also there is the context that England was itself colonised by waves of different attackers who diminished an earlier cohesion, and built instead a warrior culture

which ultimately harmed much of the world. In Ireland there is naturally always great criticism of Britain, but little is ever remembered of a time of shared cultural references, an earlier neolithic cosmology which shared our standing stones, stone circles, dolmen and other practices, art and trade. Personally I find it helpful to look at what we have in common, rather than to keep stressing what divides us. I realise that is simplistic, and I do not mean to negate Irish history in any way. I do however believe there is something indigenous within us all that we need to excavate—for ultimately it was in our earliest cultures that we viewed the Earth as sacred, and that is what we need to get back to if we are to save life on Earth as we know it.

The acceptance of vulnerability is incredibly difficult within Western culture, partly because we do not as a society really work to address vulnerability and care properly for the elderly, the unwell, those with special needs, even pregnant women, babies, creatures. Rather than embracing vulnerability as a key element of life that we could gyre our societies around, we tend to do the opposite, and create societies, buildings, urban landscapes, for the able bodied, the physically fit, and increasingly towards the elite. Many of the old cities of Europe are becoming ghettos for the über rich, while the poor are being pushed further and further out into the suburbs and deeper into an underclass.

We are running from our vulnerability, not towards it. So when people are vulnerable, as myself and my daughter were in the year that the poem relates to, people are not properly supported by society, they are in ways ‘cast out further from the mainstream’ and in becoming doubly vulnerable then, we feel our vulnerability more keenly, and are both fragile within ourselves, and unsupported by an over-stressed medical system, expensive health solutions, inadequate counselling supports, etc.

Mental health is part of this. There is a huge expectation that we will all accept and embrace our strange society with its rampant capitalism, and thrive within this space. But the only way to thrive is to shut down one’s sensitivity. Most young people can’t do this. It isn’t healthy for them to do so. So they struggle to find themselves and find their place in this strange, compromised world. Most artists can’t shut down their sensitivity. It is essential that they do not. So instead of shutting down, sensitive people become more mentally vulnerable.

It’s tragic really. Krishnamurti said “It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.” I agree with this”.