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# The Unseen Spaces: Landscape, the Female Body, and the Bildungsroman. Narrating the Transition Between Girlhood and Womanhood in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*

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### Recommended Citation

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THE UNSEEN SPACES: LANDSCAPE, THE FEMALE BODY, AND THE  
BILDUNGSROMAN. NARRATING THE TRANSITION BETWEEN GIRLHOOD AND  
WOMANHOOD IN 'EILIS NI DHUIBHNE'S *THE DANCERS DANCING*

by

Erin J. Kerley

B.A., Saint Louis University, 2012

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts

Department of English  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 2014

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of English Literature

Approved by:

Dr. Ryan Netzley, Director of Graduate Studies

Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

March 27, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

ERIN J. KERLEY, for the Master of Arts degree in ENGLISH LITERATURE, presented on March 27, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE UNSEEN SPACES: LANDSCAPE, THE FEMALE BODY, AND THE BILDUNGSROMAN. NARRATING THE TRANSITION BETWEEN GIRLHOOD AND WOMANHOOD IN ÉILÍS NÍ DHUIBHNE'S *THE DANCERS DANCING*

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Ryan Netzley, Director of Graduate Studies

Using both Kontje's and Bolaki's discussions of the *bildungsroman* and ecofeminist criticism, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's novel, *The Dancers Dancing*, can be read as an exploration into the (often overlooked or hidden) experience of Irish female adolescence. Ní Dhuibhne likens the "unseen" spaces of the Irish country landscape – like the river the main character, Orla, frequents – to the experience of the adolescent Irish female.

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In his book, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre*, Todd C. Kontje attempts to define the genre of the traditional bildungsroman. Originally, the term *Bildung* referred to a passive transformation of a Christian into the person God intended him to be – with God being the active force (Kontje 1). However, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new meaning of *Bildung* developed: “Instead of being passive recipients of a preexistent form, individuals now gradually develop their own innate potential through interaction with their environment. Organic imagery of natural growth replaces a model of divine intervention” (Kontje 2). Eventually, this concept of personal development was combined with the tradition of the novel to create the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. According to Kontje, the bildungsroman is a story of apprenticeship and personal development. In the traditional bildungsroman, a young man will enter the work force or academic world, maneuver it with the help of a trusted mentor, successfully court and marry his ideal woman, and eventually master his skill. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the genre gained popularity outside of Germany – Kontje even cites James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a near perfect example of the bildungsroman throughout his book, emphasizing the spread of the bildungsroman throughout Europe, the place it holds in the Irish literature, and the impact it has had on the Irish national narrative.

Over time, the bildungsroman has expanded and transformed to include various types of coming-of-age stories. With this extension, however, several debates about what kinds of narratives actually constitute the label of bildungsroman have emerged: in particular, a discussion concerning the appropriate label for female narratives of development. If the story centers on a young woman, can the narrative effectively (or rightly) be called a bildungsroman? In her discussion of the bildungsroman, Stella Bolaki writes, “The *Bildungsroman* lends itself well to approaches that draw on deconstruction; although the process of narrating the

development of the individual subject has been conceptualised in linear and coherent terms, there is room to dismantle the genre's aesthetic architecture, in other words, room for alternative formulations of development" (Bolaki 19). In other words, although the tradition of the bildungsroman may have developed concerning only narratives of boyhood and a character's development into manhood, the genre is flexible. While the bildungsroman will usually focus on one character's development throughout the novel, surrounding events and secondary characters can greatly differ. Moving from childhood to adulthood inherently welcomes (and often encourages) a break from tradition. Why, then, shouldn't the bildungsroman?

In Kontje's discussion of the bildungsroman, he points out that men are often associated with free will and human freedom while women are associated with nature, and "human freedom is absolutely necessary for personal growth; by equating women with nature, they [Humboldt and Schiller] deny women any chance of participating in the process of *Bildung*" (7). By this definition, women – as equivalents to nature – cannot participate in the type of development required of *Bildung* because they are passive. Referencing Irish women, more specifically, Heather Ingman describes the role of the Irish landscape in the stereotypes of Irish women: "The way in which in Irish nationalism the Irish landscape came to be personified as Mother Ireland associated Irish women with passivity, and to this Catholicism added the figure of the Virgin Mary imposing humility, chastity and obedience on Irish women" (519). However, Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* works to change these stereotypes and perspectives. In the words of Gretchen T. Legler, "Nature [...] has been inscribed in the same way that women's bodies and sexual pleasure have been inscribed in patriarchal discourse, as passive, interceptive, docile, as mirror and complement. The conceptual links between women and nature suggested by ecofeminists make rewriting one part of rewriting the other" (233). Although she often ascribes

natural aspects to Orla's and the other girls' bodies – effectively mirroring one with the other – Ní Dhuibhne seems to aim to rewrite the passive discourse surrounding the feminine and nature. In doing so, she gives voice to the female Irish narrative, and more specifically, she begins to reimagine the bildungsroman as a genre that can narrate Irish female adolescence.

Further placing *The Dancers Dancing* within the category of the female bildungsroman is Orla's lack of a suitable mother figure or female mentor. In her book *Unbecoming Women*, Susan Fraiman claims that mothers are “usually dead or deficient as models” (6). Although Orla's mother is alive, she is not the ideal model for Orla, either. Elizabeth seems to perpetuate Fraiman's point that stories of middle-class female protagonists “tend to insist that personal destiny evolves in dialectical relation to historical events, social structures, and other people” by insisting that Orla associates herself with the right people (she cannot be friends with Sandra because her family lives in a flat) and keeps up appearances (Elizabeth and Orla, wearing their nicest clothes, have expensive tea and cakes at the Hibernian Hotel once a year). Even Orla, as a thirteen-year-old girl, recognizes the patriarchal restrictions placed on her in Dublin: “That is how it is for girls... Doing what you are told is ethics, philosophy, morality, religion, all rolled into one... What other people tell you to do is always right. Other people are adults, teachers, the Church, the government. Or anybody else really who has ideas to force on girls” (172-3). As a young girl in Ireland, Orla's future is originally determined by those around her. Orla, however, eventually breaks free of any parental control and societal constraints at the Gaeltacht: another hallmark of the bildungsroman.

The female Irish national narrative has only recently developed, especially when compared to the canonized male national narratives. With woman and mother used interchangeably in the country's constitution, it is no surprise that female narratives concerning



any other parts of a female's personal development were nonexistent until recent years. Even within the novel, Ní Dhuibhne classifies girlhood as largely unnoticed or invisible: "Boys were boys or lads or fellas. Girls were just young *ones*: they did not merit a generic name of their own" (94). Even now, according to Jane Elizabeth Dougherty, novels about Irish girlhood or any transition into womanhood barely exist, and any that do "are obscure, and often formally or stylistically peculiar" (50). Most of the novel is told from a third person, omniscient narrator from Orla's perspective. However, throughout the novel, the perspective will often shift to that of the Banatee's daughter, Sava's, to an unnamed neighbor of the Doherty's, or to Pauline's. When the students first begin to learn Irish in the schoolhouse, the English text shifts to the structure of the Irish language. Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* certainly exhibits these formal and stylistic peculiarities – especially with these noticeable shifts in the narrator's voice.

*The Dancers Dancing* is also peculiar in the novel's representation of time. In her article, "No Right to Be a Child': Irish Girlhood and Queer Time in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*," Kelly J. S. McGovern discusses the representation of time in Ní Dhuibhne's novel in relation to Orla's development and the Irish national narrative, in general. McGovern argues that it is the temporal in between in *Dancers Dancing* – Ní Dhuibhne's "queer renderings of time" – that redefines the Irish national narrative, without paying much attention to the actual space of the land. I, however, argue that it is, in fact, the spatial in between and underneath – the unseen spaces – that help Ní Dhuibhne effectively reimagine the bildungsroman and Irish female narrative. The attention Éilís Ní Dhuibhne pays to the unseen spaces of the land surrounding Donegal and the Gaeltacht highlights the unseen space of the adolescent female body. With this, Ní Dhuibhne successfully narrates the unseen transition from girlhood to womanhood in Irish literature.

McGovern rightly makes note of the framework of Ní Dhuibhne's novel by citing three introductory chapters and a final, concluding chapter. Before we meet any of the adolescent girls in *The Dancers Dancing*, Ní Dhuibhne establishes the innate connection between the female body – and more specifically, the developing female body – and the land of Donegal in her first chapter, “The map”:

Imagine you are in an airplane, flying at twenty thousand feet. The landscape spreads beneath like a chequered tablecloth thrown across a languid body. From this vantage point, no curve is apparent. It is flat earth – pan flat, pan flat, platter flat to the edges, its green and gold patches stained at intervals by lumps of mountain, brownish purple clots of varicose vein in the smooth skin of land. (1)

The view we see is from above, which is a vantage point none of the girls or other characters in the novel experience. We are asked to view the land of Donegal as lacking in curvature, although it is apparent it exists from the description of the mountains and hills. Moreover, the narrator's assertion that “no curve is apparent” from the aerial view is reflected in the pre-pubescent bodies of the young girls in *The Dancers Dancing*. Varicose veins, while usually a sign of old age, signify the aging that occurs in the following pages of the novel – an experience that will invade the otherwise smooth and pristine skin of the young girls' lives and will mark them as adults by the end.

What exists between girlhood and womanhood, however, is what remains a mystery in Irish culture and literature, and in “The map,” Ní Dhuibhne begins to slowly chip away at the wall that has been shielding it for so long. From above, the narrator describes the burn, “a narrow bold blue-black line meandering in the nervous way of mapped rivers from one

edge – the brown triangle hills – to the monobluish sea. From your superior angle you see it all, every inch of it” (2). We can see the burn, a place that – as we will see – often acts as a catalyst for the development of Orla and the other girls throughout the novel, and we can see it permeate the land across the map. Here, Ní Dhuibhne addresses Irish culture directly: the burn is visible from above, just like there is obviously a period of development between girlhood and womanhood. However, that period is not written about, not shown, not talked about. It is unseen. From above, we can see the people along the burn, but we can’t make out their faces, can’t hear their names, “can’t see those who are secreted in the boxes” (2). The details of the burn are unseen, unheard, and unknown, just as the details of female adolescence in Irish culture. In fact, Ní Dhuibhne asserts that the map described is only half true, and “the rest of the story is in the mud. Clear as muddy old mud” (3). The map of the transition from Irish girlhood to Irish womanhood that is available is not a true representation of the experience, and the pages of *The Dancers Dancing* are the mud – the rest of the story. We are supposed to dig through the mud and experience Irish female adolescence.

The relationship between the burn, the female body, and the unseen space of adolescence is further emphasized in the following chapter, “Washing.” We are still not aware who the girls are, but here, Ní Dhuibhne offers the first description of the four girls staying in the Doherty house. Ní Dhuibhne describes the girls in natural terms – a girl, later determined as Jacqueline, is described as “a willowy branch of a girl” (4) – and the girls’ movements are mirrored in the movements of their surroundings: “They bend over the water, and over them bend great elm trees, some oaks” (4). This apparently innate connection with nature occurs in the unseen space of the burn, emphasizing the role of the landscape in this bildungsroman.

McGovern argues that the “parenthetical form” of the book temporally marks the narrative of Orla’s experiences at the Gaeltacht as the in between. However, McGovern pays little attention to the actual space present in these “in between” chapters, which help to more fully illustrate the Irish female adolescence. In order to further connect the adolescent experience of Orla with the Irish national narrative, Ní Dhuibhne attributes the age of adolescence with the Gaeltacht and even with Ireland as a nation. The college was “born in the heady days of the Celtic revival” and now flourishes that “the country has reached adolescence and is breaking away from its Roman fathers” (20). Here, Ní Dhuibhne offers a brief and subtle characteristic of adolescence: the forging of one’s own path – a path that is free of parental, and more specifically patriarchal, constraints. The Gaeltacht is called “a land of the child” (161), but I would argue that it is, in fact, the land of the adolescent. For the adolescents at the Gaeltacht, the Tubber landscape plays a heavy role, as Orla observes, “almost everyone looks healthier and more beautiful. It is as if nature ensures that their bodies blend in with the perfect landscape, the light of the brilliant summer” (180). The landscape and their contact with nature allow the students and the Gaeltacht to come into their own, and eventually, they look wild as though they “belong to nobody” (203).

Early in her novel, Ní Dhuibhne makes a heavy distinction between the cityscape of Dublin and the countryside of Donegal in both a literal and a symbolic sense. Dublin is a seen space where Orla is invisible. However, Tubber, and more specifically the Gaeltacht and the burn, is an unseen space where, still unseen, Orla is surrounded by other unseen people. Orla is a figure that represents both: “Two sides of the Crilly coin: the good and the bad, the tourist west and the dull east, the rare Irish and the common English, the heathery rocky lovely and the bricky breezeblock ugly, the desirable rural idyll and the unchosen urban reality. Holiday and

work. Past and present” (6). From the beginning of the novel, this tension Orla feels between her two identities is evident, quickly culminating in Orla’s decision to shun her Tubber identity. Gretchen T. Legler asserts, “Many canonical works...reinforce the humanist notion that the ‘authentic’ self is necessarily dependent on the managing of spatial boundaries, especially the boundaries between nature and culture, between the me and not me, between the I and the other” (229). However, as Orla discovers through the land of Donegal and the Gaeltacht, she must embrace both sides of the “Crilly coin” to become whole and enter into womanhood. For Orla to fully develop, she must ignore the boundaries between the Dublin Orla and the Tubber Orla. The boundary between Dublin and Crilly is manifested in Auntie Annie and Orla’s treatment of her. According to Jeanette Roberts Shumaker, Orla rejects Auntie Annie, not only because she represents the Tubber Crillys from whom Orla wishes to separate herself at the Gaeltacht, but because Auntie Annie, as a “retarded Irish peasant” with bad legs and an overweight body, “symbolize[s] the grotesqueness of [her] own overweight body” (103). Only after she visits Auntie Annie with Aisling and Michaél does Orla finally accept the two sides of the Crilly coin. Therefore, for Ní Dhuibhne, true Irish identity and true womanhood is a study in hybridity, and it is in this way that Ní Dhuibhne begins to reimagine the Irish national narrative into one that includes the experience of female adolescence.

According to Deborah Slicer, much recent criticism has tried to separate the female body from nature – focusing only on the “social text” of the body (57). In response, she asserts, “We are a culture generally deaf to both our bodies and the rest of material life, deaf at an increasing cost” (61). I assert that Ní Dhuibhne sees this dissociation and attempts to reconcile it in *The Dancers Dancing*. In Donegal, Orla begins her transition from girlhood to womanhood,

and it is also in Donegal that she develops a connection with nature – a connection that will help define and illuminate her maturation.

*The Dancers Dancing* is a novel pervasive with unseen spaces – the most obtrusive and important being the burn. The burn, the creek or small river that runs through Tubber and eventually into the ocean, acts as a sanctuary of female adolescence during the summer Orla is at the Gaeltacht. We are first introduced to the burn in the first chapter, and in it, we are told that though we may be able to see the burn from above, we cannot see the details:

What you can't see is what it is better not to see: the sap and the clay and the weeds and the mess. The chthonic puddle and muddle of brain and heart and kitchen and sewer and vein and sinew and ink and stamp and sugar and stew and cloth and stitch and swill and beer and lemonade and tea and soap and nerve and memory and energy and pine and weep and laugh and sneer and say nothing and say something and in between, in between, in between, that is the truth and that is the story. (3)

From above, we cannot see “what it is better not to see,” but if we dig through the pages of the book, we become aware of all the details. Ní Dhuibhne combines the brain, heart, other components of the body, and very feminized and domesticated images and objects into a spiritual puddle – simultaneously representing the unseen spaces of the body, of the feminine, of the natural, and of the underworld. Here again, McGovern’s argument concerning Ní Dhuibhne’s queer uses of time and the parenthetical form of the book makes sense: Ní Dhuibhne, through this passage, is directing us to look, quite literally, in between the parenthetical chapters for the real story, but more can be said for the physical space of the burn as an in between.

The first time Orla encounters the burn, we hear the story from a different perspective: we hear the story from someone who appears to be watching the girls from nearby. The first burn scene occurs when the girls are free from the watchful eye of Banatee Doherty, thereby illustrating a hallmark of the bildungsroman genre. In this first scene, the four girls are washing their clothes in the burn, a domestic chore expected of girls their age. Also, the first encounter the girls have with the burn is still in the Doherty's garden, and Orla watches "the suds float off to the arch in the wall through which the stream passes out of the garden" (53). Orla's first experience with the burn is still a very localized, very safe one. However, she yearns for more, thinking it is "a pity there isn't a bridge across it or something" (53). While Orla wishes for a bridge to venture across the burn, later in the novel the burn acts as a bridge from girlhood to womanhood for Orla.

In "Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory: Bodies as Grounds," Deborah Slicer cites Ariel Salleh saying, "Women's reproductive labor and such patriarchally assigned work roles as cooking and cleaning bridge men and nature in a very obvious way, and one that is denigrated by patriarchal culture [...] The language that typifies a woman's experience [...] situates her along with nature itself. She is seen, and accordingly sees herself, as somehow part of it" (52-3). In other words, women are not inherently or naturally closer to nature, but instead simply feel closer to nature because that is where society has aligned their understanding of their roles. Therefore, Orla's first experience with the burn is a significant one because her execution of a feminized and domestic chore in this natural setting, according to Salleh, allows her to foster an intimate connection with the burn that may have not developed otherwise.

McGovern's concept of in between time comes to fruition in the second burn scene:

Headmaster Joe believes, has to believe, that the day is so packed with activities that the students have no time to get up to mischief of any kind. As far as he knows, they are always engaged in walking to and from the schoolhouse, in learning or playing or dancing, in singing or eating or sleeping [...] But of course there are intervals, interstices, crevices in the edifice he has constructed that he can't afford to know about [...] Slowly his map is cracking, and through the cracks the insects start to creep. (79)

As the weeks of the summer wear on, the girls begin to figure out how to make the most of their in between time. Playtime gets shortened because it rains or the afternoons get too cold, and they learn how to walk to and from the schoolhouse much faster than their original pace. Here, the patriarchal constructs of the Gaeltacht are faltering, and the land and the time of the adolescent is rising. Per McGovern's argument, the times that the girls find between their required activities by the Gaeltacht are the in between times – the cracks in Headmaster Joe's map. However, Headmaster Joe's map is physical as well as temporal. His map consists solely of the schoolhouse, the beach where the students play and swim, and their Banatees' houses. On his map, he does not account for places like the burn, or later the boathouse, on his map. These places are hidden from his view, either voluntarily or involuntarily unseen by him and the other teachers.

The second burn scene is finds Orla at the burn, past the Doherty's garden, by herself, and it is when Orla first starts to connect with the burn and change. Orla begins to walk along the burn, and eventually hops from stone to stone in the burn. She is contemplating turning back home when:



Her feet keep going, however, as if they have a life of their own. They take longer and braver leaps, but they never miss. Even when she lands on a sharp pointed stone, or on a big round stone that wobbles terrifyingly, like a loose tooth, she remains upright. Her feet are sure and practised, they can cope much better than she would have given them credit for. (83)

In the unseen burn, Orla's body – another unseen space – takes over. She herself is amazed by the agility and coordination she possesses in the burn. The lines between nature, body, and mind are blurred: an unsteady rock is likened to a loose tooth, Orla's feet are able to act independently of her mind as though they can think for themselves. Orla “stoops” and “twists this way and that” with great agility to get through a hedge that has grown in the burn, and on the other side of the hedge and into a ditch she finds a tunnel overgrown with moss and vegetation (84). In the tunnel, Orla feels as though she is in “a hidden green cathedral, deeply centered in a vast forest of shrub and bramble” (84). For Orla, the burn is somewhat religious: it is a hidden space where she feels unity in her body and spirit and also with her surroundings. What ultimately drives her to leave the burn that day is not any fear that she will injure herself on the rocks or drown in the stream. Instead, she fears fairies and otters with “possible vindictive purposes” (85).

During the third burn scene, Aisling and Pauline join Orla, and Pauline quickly takes to the burn while Aisling is hesitant. Because of Pauline, Orla travels further along the burn than she ever has, and she can still “let it sink into her head, along her bloodstream, even now, even in the company of Pauline” (137). The presence of the other girls, especially Pauline, does not hinder Orla's connection with the burn until, however, Pauline jumps from the waterfall and into a pool at the bottom. Orla's body is still connected to the burn: “Her body has become,

suddenly, totally relaxed. All the muscles spread pleasurably, the way they do after intense running or something like that. Her arms, tummy, thighs, legs feel soft, pleased. They seem removed from her head” (138). Again, Orla’s body is able to think for itself while in the burn, but unlike before, her mind is at a disconnect: “Orla closes her eyes and flexes to jump. But she can’t. When the moment comes to give herself over to the jump, she can’t do it” (138). As much as she would like to swim in the pool, Orla cannot handle “that sensation of free falling, being out of control” (139). Just as in the previous burn scene, it is not the contact with nature that she fears, but something else, something other.

If the first three burn scenes begin to illustrate the connection Orla develops with nature as she journeys through adolescence, the final two show the connection in complete fruition. In the fourth burn scene, Orla finds herself alone in the burn, but not for long. Orla notices Michaél fishing in the burn, and it is then that another hallmark of the bildungsroman occurs: sexual awakening:

He looks like the playboy of the western world or something, the hero of some historical romance about Ireland, or even Italy. Orla looks at him standing there and realizes that he is the most beautiful boy she has ever seen. [...] She stands on the bridge for a few minutes, two or three minutes. Then he glances up and sees her. He is obviously taken aback: it must be clear to him that she has been staring at him for a while; no that he catches sight of her he remembers that he felt eyes on him all the time, as his eyes were on the fish he is stalking. But her eyes have forced him to take his off his quarry, something he never does. [...] They look at each other and Orla smiles and raises her hand a fraction from the

bridge in something that is about one tenth of a wave. He doesn't smile or make a gesture. (227-8)

Orla enters into the sexual world as she romanticizes Michaél and likens him to a hero. In this moment, Orla recognizes that she has sexual feelings, and their exchange, although small, is not trivial. Later in the chapter, Ní Dhuibhne reinforces Orla's comparison of Michaél as a hero when he catches a leaping salmon out of the river with his bare hands in an Oisín-like fashion: "To take a fish leaping is a miracle, but he has done it. [...] He has to concentrate totally, grasping the big heavy silver thrash, and struggle, walk along the uneven but familiar riverbed to the bank, stone the fish until it understands what the end of the game is" (228). Oisín, as the original Irish hero, is the epitome of masculinity, and Michaél embodies it. The salmon leaping from the water is a phallic symbol, and Orla witnesses Michaél's control over it with a sense of awe, further emphasizing her sexual awakening. Orla only leaves the scene after the fish is dead and Michaél reciprocates her feelings.

All future interactions with Michaél are sexually charged, especially because they occur after Orla enters into puberty. Orla sees Michaél and "something happens to her whole body, something that has never happened before. [...] It's as if she were going underwater, under glaucous, clear water. Under water, but breathing deeply and calmly of the freshest air" (253). Later, Orla and Michaél meet in a field where the grass is high and shields them. When Michaél touches Orla, she feels "her head, her body, her blood are filled with a sweetness like the raspberries on the bank of the burn, like the salt water caressing her skin, like the sun in the high blue sky, the stars, the drooping dog roses, unimaginably pink, blossomy" (263). Orla's sexual development is intrinsically connected with the burn and the Tubber landscape, so much so that the feelings Michaél ignites in her are the same ones she experiences in the burn.

While the fourth burn scene narrated Orla's sexual awakening, the fifth scene is a culmination of her coming of age story – narrating her break from social and patriarchal restrictions, an induction into, albeit unrealized at the time, an exclusive female realm of knowing, and a physical transition into womanhood. The final burn scene of the novel again finds Orla in the burn alone, and again, she flawlessly hops across the rocks and ends up in the green tunnel. Orla goes even further into the tunnel before, past the waterfall, and here she finds freedom. Orla realizes that she is alone, and in the hidden space of the burn, Orla begins to embrace her adolescence. She shouts and the cavern echoes her:

‘I can do what I want to!’ she says.

‘want to want to.’

‘Whatever the hell I want to.’

‘want to want to.’

‘Whatever the fuck I want to.’

‘want to want to.’

‘Fuck fuck fuck fuck.’

‘uch uch uch.’

She has never said fuck before. She did not know before that she could say it, or harboured any wish to do so.

[...] Still, there is a surprising store of words in Orla's head that have never before emerged into the light of day, into the sound of day. Her own ears. She has hardly ever heard her own voice, listened to her own voice, and it gets louder and louder, clearer and clearer, as she gets used to it. (234)

In a society where children, especially young girls, are meant to be neither seen nor heard, Orla's shouting is cathartic and liberating. The echo is significant in two ways. First, it is another representation of the large role that the burn and nature plays in Orla's transition from girlhood to womanhood. In a way, she is having a conversation with nature, and it is talking back to her. Secondly, Orla can hear her own voice, and therefore, she is able to start seeing herself and her development. The liberation she feels from shouting curses into the abyss is indicative of her breaking from patriarchal constraints – the same patriarchy that keeps her adolescence unseen.

Exhausted from shouting, “the damp greenness of the burn [...] seeping into her stomach, pressing upon it” (235), Orla decides to head towards the bank of the river. Orla's exhaustion, here, is deeper than physical: it is as though it is connected with the burn and her surroundings. On the bank, Orla stumbles upon something unexpected: her foot hits something that feels like a rock, but “she knows what it is. In fact she knew, really, when her feet felt the shine and the smoothness the first time” (236). Although it is never named, Orla has come across a *cillín* – a burial ground for unbaptized babies. The *cillín* is an unseen space within another unseen space. With this discovery comes an unspoken female knowledge: Orla knows what she finds even though *cillín* are never spoken of in society. Later in the novel, Orla has a dream about Nuala Crilly, who drowned her baby in the burn. Finding the *cillín* has allowed Orla to tap into some level of knowing that is only available to women and through contact with the burn. An unseen girl has knowledge of an unseen action in an unseen place – only members of this circle can see this space, and it still remains unseen in society.

After her contact with the *cillín*, Orla gets her period – officially marking her physical transition into womanhood. It is no coincidence that this change occurs after Orla comes into

contact with a space that partly exists because of an unwillingness to recognize female development in adolescence. The physical transition from girlhood to womanhood is so unacknowledged that the closest store where Orla could purchase sanitary napkins is miles away. Even her own mother does not think to send any sanitary napkins with Orla to the Gaeltacht because Irish female adolescence is so unrecognized. Ní Dhuibhne likens even this occurrence to a part of the landscape: “A spot of blood marks her grey pants like a bright poppy” (237). Comparing Orla’s period to a flower romanticizes the experience, though the rest is anything but. Orla must procure sanitary pads in secret from Sandra, much like an under-the-table drug deal. However, Orla is coming into her own with the help of the Tubber landscape and is relieved that “nature has not abandoned her” (239).

When Orla finally leaves the Gaeltacht, she has fully experienced adolescence. Physically, mentally, and emotionally begun her journey into womanhood, and she has experienced all of this in an unseen space. Yet, her experiences remain in Tubber. Once back in Dublin, the students stay quiet about the happenings in both the schoolhouse and the in between places of Tubber. When asked by their parents how their summers were, the students simply respond “‘Wus all right’” (275). The adolescent experience remains unseen and unacknowledged in the seen space of Dublin.

In the final chapter of the novel, we are taken back to the land of the Gaeltacht. However, this land is very much seen: “There is a heritage centre, vast as a cathedral, in the middle of the valley [...] It’s the Gaeltacht triumphant – not a bit like Tubber” (276). A tourist center exists in a place that was previously hidden – making the area noticed. This Gaeltacht is no longer the place of the adolescent because it is no longer unseen. Orla finds herself in a populated space,

surrounded by her own children and the children of others, and in this seen space, Orla speaks candidly about her life after the summer of the Gaeltacht.

Orla is now a grown woman, and this chapter is narrated by her in first person, which raises a question: If the entire novel was, in fact, narrated by Orla, why is “Now” the only chapter narrated in first person? The lack of first person narration throughout the majority of the novel further underscores the Irish female adolescence – and simultaneously the Irish female bildungsroman – as an unseen space. Orla only narrates her experience after the Gaeltacht in the first person, even though she recalls other experiences from her teenage years. For Orla, however, the Gaeltacht represented the summer and the peak of her adolescence – she came back from Tubber at the end of that summer as a woman. In fact, she recalls that on her return to Tubber the summer after the Gaeltacht she was “taller, thinner” and when she met Michaél again, it was not in the burn. Instead, it was in the very seen space of the Fairyland Ballroom, and instead of feeling like she felt in the burn, she “was one with the crazy venality of it all, the loud throbbing fertility dances” (278). What she did the second summer in Tubber, she did to be noticed, whereas what she did during the summer of the Gaeltacht, she did to avoid being noticed. Her first experience alone in the burn is significantly different than her experiences at the Fairyland Ballroom, where she wants to be seen: “Some people – most people, especially if they are adult – love to feel the eyes of others on them. Reality is being perceived, condoned or condemned. But privacy is what Orla craves. The reality she is looking for is inside herself, hidden from all eyes” (81). Even Orla, as a woman, seems to feel a significant disconnect from her adolescence, which is further illustrated by her lack of contact with Michaél in the final chapter. She thinks she sees him at the beach, but she never comes in contact with him and never sees him again. All she can do is speculate about his life. She is not able to narrate it from a first

person perspective. Instead, her adolescent experience even remains slightly unseen to her. However, we, as the audience, are provided a map, in the form of a novel, by Ní Dhuibhne to navigate both the natural unseen spaces of the Tubber landscape and the unseen space of Irish female adolescence.

Throughout the novel, the burn gradually becomes more seen because Orla brings more people with her and finds more people there. However, the burn still remains largely unseen. The burn also becomes more seen as we witness Orla's journey with it, but the story, in Ní Dhuibhne's words, "is in the mud," and we must dig through it. Just like the burn, the experience of Irish female adolescence still remains largely unseen in the Irish national narrative. If the burn is, in fact, a symbol of the Irish female adolescence, Ní Dhuibhne articulates its nature in the first pages of her novel. Although it may remain hidden to most (whether by choice or not), it still exists, and it always will. Orla may only represent one story, but the stories of others still occur – "endlessly beginning and endlessly ending, endlessly moving and endlessly unchanging," just as the burn flows through Tubber and to the sea.



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The Unseen Spaces: Landscape, the Female Body, and the Bildungsroman. Narrating the Transition Between Girlhood and Womanhood in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*

Major Professor: Dr. Ryan Netzley