

“Joyce’s Long Shadow”: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s Short Fiction¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical commentary on Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s inspiring relationship with James Joyce’s *Dubliners* as backbone to her own collection of short fiction *The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Short Stories*

(2000). As will be argued, Ní Dhuibhne establishes an intertextual dialogue with Joyce’s collection by both drawing and departing from *Dubliners* through interpretation, interrogation and reshaping. This article will first examine the relevance of the Joycean narrative pattern in *Dubliners* in relation with Ní Dhuibhne’s own conception of the Irish short story and of the short story cycle, to finally look into Ní Dhuibhne’s “At Sally Gap.” This particular story, compiled in the above mentioned collection, appears aesthetically and ideologically indebted to Joyce’s short stories in general, and more specifically to “The Dead.” Along with

Joyce, Ní Dhuibhne reflects in her narrative on the relationship between exile (physical or emotional), as well as on a sense of estrangement with respect to one’s own homeland and Irish identity as posed by her dislocated, paralysed characters.

Keywords: James Joyce, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, short story, exile, *Dubliners*, *The Pale Gold of Alaska*

In many of her writings and interviews, Irish writer Éilís Ní Dhuibhne has often addressed the question of the thorny tension between “tradition and the individual talent,” as T.S. Eliot famously put it, or the Bloomian “anxiety of influence” which lies beyond the surface of any writer’s process of composition: “As a writer, I tend to believe that I am individual and unique —indeed, every individual work, novel, short story, seems to make its special demands and to have its own unique characteristics. However, only a fool believes she is not influenced by the writing and traditions of the past [...] We all stand on the shoulder on giants” (Hemon 1). Ní Dhuibhne has overtly acknowledged the influence of numerous writers and varied literary traditions, but James Joyce’s particular vision of *Dubliners* and Dublin life seems to have been especially fruitful in Ní Dhuibhne’s literary landscape: “When I started writing I believed I was writing a spontaneous short story, my own, uninfluenced by anyone [...] I didn’t say ‘I want to write stories like the stories in *Dubliners*,’ but that’s what I did.” (Ní Dhuibhne, “My Joyce” 11)

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical commentary on Ní Dhuibhne’s inspiring relationship with James Joyce’s *Dubliners* as backbone to her own collection of short fiction *The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Short Stories* (2000). As will be argued, Ní Dhuibhne establishes an intertextual dialogue with Joyce’s collection by both drawing and departing from *Dubliners* through interpretation, interrogation and reshaping. This article will first examine the relevance of the Joycean narrative pattern in *Dubliners* in relation with Ní Dhuibhne’s own conception of the Irish short story and of the short story cycle, to finally look into Ní Dhuibhne’s “At Sally Gap,” a story compiled in the above mentioned collection, aesthetically and ideologically indebted to Joyce’s short stories in general, and more specifically to “The Dead.” Like Joyce, Ní Dhuibhne reflects in her narrative on the relationship between exile (physical or emotional), as well as on a sense of estrangement with respect to one’s own

homeland and Irish identity as posed by her dislocated, paralysed characters. Unlike Joyce, however, Ní Dhuibhne specifically addresses the intersection between exile, Irishness and women's sexuality in her collection. (Moloney, "Exile in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne" 88)

Ní Dhuibhne regards Joyce as "the begetter of the modern Irish story" ("My Joyce" 11), to the extent that "most short story writers in Ireland are still heavily indebted to Joyce, who gave us a template in *Dubliners* that we have not yet replaced" ("My Joyce" 11). Furthermore, the hybrid, fluid form of the short story similarly suits Joyce and Ní Dhuibhne to portray Ireland as a place of identities in transition, and the Irish imagination as essentially migratory (Kearny 7). As

Heather Ingman has suggested, liminality, this "in-between place of shifting identities, of change and transformation, is the realm in which the Irish short story also operates" (12). Within this particular context —Ingman further argues— the Irish short story would be construed as a form "tracking fragmentation and dissolution" rather than reflecting solid events or quotidian reality (12), an aesthetics which Ní Dhuibhne shares in her consideration of the genre and which she regards as heir to Joyce's stories: "I belong to the tradition that prizes language, imagery, form and psychology, and resists plot, larger-than-life events and characters, all that is sensational and exaggerated. Big dramatic events seem false to me, and alien to the short story genre." (Hemon 1)

Dubliners' "template," as Ní Dhuibhne herself has acknowledged, underpins *The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Short Stories*. It is of common knowledge that Joyce had conceived of Dublin as a sequence of stories, eventually published in 1914 after long years of battling with the publishers' demands who, in Joyce's view, "mortally mutilate[d]" his volume (*Letters II* 368) by forcing the writer to omit passages, change words and eliminate two of the fifteen stories: "I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished

looking-glass” (*Letters I* 64). Joyce’s ethic claim for Ireland’s self-examination partakes both of a personal commitment to truth and of a writer’s duty to implement change in face of moral and spiritual degradation: “I believe that in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way I have composed it I have taken the first step towards the liberation of my country.” (*Letters I* 62–3).

For Joyce, *Dubliners* had been designed as an integral whole according to his ethic and aesthetic programme, to the extent that a minimum alteration would also mean profound implications for the narrative’s desired effect. Although the stories of *Dubliners* are independent units, their conscientious, scrupulous arrangement in a cycle addresses issues which only the whole sequence can evoke. The short story cycle (Ingram) or “composite novel,” as Dunn and Morris have more recently redefined it (3), “combines the complexities of a miscellany with the integrative qualities of a novel,” where the different stories appear interrelated and conform a coherent whole, disposed “according to one or more organising principles.”

(14)

Joyce’s perennial influence can be felt in Ní Dhuibhne’s *The Pale Gold of Alaska* in different discursive levels: the autonomous stories integrated in this miscellany are underpinned by interrelating, “organising principles” in the collection, which is also viewed as a chapter of Ireland’s moral history. As Joyce’s *Dubliners*, *The Pale Gold of Alaska* is a complex reflection on Ireland and on her colonial past, where Dublin functions as a suffocating microcosm with pernicious effects for its inhabitants, living in a state of spiritual paralysis. Both Joyce and Ní Dhuibhne question received assumptions which pertain to nationality and Irishness, more specifically as understood by nationalist discourses. In this sense, Joyce and Ní Dhuibhne’s characters often feel at odds with identity formulations, and become emotional exiles, as Ní Dhuibhne herself has suggested: “*The Pale Golf of Alaska* deals with [a] sense of dislocation and being an outsider, [...] the experience of being on the margin [...] I’m increasingly interested in this

duality and ambiguity of my own personality, which is very typically Irish.” (Moloney, “Interview” 105)

However, and whereas Joyce explores the psychology of those emotional exiles in Dublin, Ní Dhuibhne largely explores the experience of physical exiles, of those Dubliners outside Ireland as emigrants, expatriates or refugees. Finally, whereas Joyce’s vision of Ireland is predominantly a male one in *Dubliners*, Ní Dhuibhne invariably uses the female perspective, which enhances the sense of displacement and dislocation from one’s culture by intertwining gender identity, sexuality and nationality.

Ní Dhuibhne reformulates in feminist terms Joyce’s vision of *Dubliners* as “a chapter in the moral history of Ireland,” a difficult task for a woman writer, since women have traditionally been exiled from historical agency, remaining silent and invisible in their subjection to history. *The Pale Gold of Alaska* emerges as a contestation of the historical, patriarchal “grand narrative” by focusing on women’s *petit récit* and foregrounding their perspective (Hemon 1) in order to reconsider the relationship between women and their representations in the historical past. As a result, Ní

Dhuibhne’s collection aims to abridge women’s prolonged absence from male official history by providing an enlightening journey through the history of Ireland rendered from the perspective of women, spanning from the 1890s flux of Irish migrants to America during the so-called “Yukon gold rush” (“The Pale Gold of Alaska”), the constitution of the Irish Free State and its aftermath (“Sex in the Context of Ireland”) to the more recent “Celtic Tiger” economy, which has often resulted in a “new kind of exile in which a proportion of the population did not have to leave their country to feel they were no longer at home.” (Ingman 245)

Ní Dhuibhne’s collection shares with Joyce’s short stories the deceptively false simplicity of “scrupulous meanness” (*Letters I* 134) to reflect the Dubliners’ sense of dislocation and paralysis, which extends its tentacles to both private and public, prosaic and divine, banal and artistic

realms. As Jeri Johnson has argued, Joyce “calmly addresses matters which in the first decade of the last century were seldom mentioned in literature: poverty, drunkenness, bullying, child-beating, sexual exhibitionism, suicide, cynical exploitation (sexual, financial, political) of children by adults, of women by men, of employees by bosses, of those with little power by those with much” (xii). Similarly, Ní Dhuibhne reassesses many of these issues (poverty and immigration, prostitution, adultery, gender difference, class segregation) and incorporates some others which at the turn of the twenty-first century are often regarded as taboo in literature: ageing and its effects on family matters, physical and mental degeneration, cancer and chemotherapy, dependent parents and dutiful daughters, capitalist exploitation and the environment.

As is well known, Joyce carefully envisaged a design of progression for his sequence: “I have tried to present [Dublin] to the indifferent public under four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order” (*Letters II & III* 134). Similarly, Ní Dhuibhne conceived of *The Pale Golf of Alaska* as a *Bildungsroman* for Ireland as a nation, so to speak, from the consequences derived from the Potato Famine, the constitution of the Irish Free State to the nineteen seventies and Celtic Tiger Ireland. The female characters of Ní Dhuibhne’s narratives exemplify the evolution of Irish women in social terms, from utter invisibility to the relative emancipation of present times. In “The Pale Gold of Alaska,” Sophie and her sisters leave Ireland’s poverty in the late 1890s. Through the course of the narrative, Sophie confronts several taboo topics (being a childless wife, sexuality and desire, adultery and an encounter with the racial “other”) which she fails to come to terms with: “It was generally known, among the Irishmen, pious or secular, sensible or wild, who were hitting gold with Ned [Sophie’s husband], that Sophie’s ordeal in Missoula at the hands of the Indians had affected her brain, and that she was not quite right in the head.” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 39)

“Sex in the Context of Ireland” is a satirical contestation of the consecration of purity and moral righteousness as the “national virtues of Ireland” (Luddy 2) by ironically questioning some ideological assumptions produced by Irish nationalist discourses as forged at the turn of the twentieth-century. The narrator, Arabella Brazil, is a young prostitute in the Dublin District of Monto, who offers her prosaic point of view of some of Ireland’s most relevant events in her making as a nation, as is the “Easter Rising” (1916) and the constitution of the Irish Free State (1921). Significantly, Ní Dhuibhne’s narrative provides an intertextual dialogue with Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus’s visit to the Dublin red light district in “Circe” in *Ulysses*, and Arabella herself could be regarded as a postmodern counterpart of the novel’s prostitute, Ms Bella Cohen. Ironically, Bella’s naïve account of her past unveils an alternative history of Ireland and of the making of the Irish Free State, characterised by poverty, deprivation, and exclusion. As the narrative unfolds, Bella and her family emerge as personal victims of some Catholic institutions which consistently deviate from ideals pertaining to charity and moral superiority.

In “The Day Elvis Presley Died,” a young student of Dublin University College travels to the state of New York to meet her boyfriend’s family. Through the course of her visit, Pat will progressively confront her taboos and fears (sexuality, ageing and dementia) and will reconcile herself with her homeland as she turns away from her boyfriend on the day Elvis Presley died. The narrative is structured as the protagonist’s series of confrontations with Americans, who are, to a large extent, “foreigners” in her view, while in turn most Americans regard Pat as alien to their culture despite obvious similarities. Pat feels both alien and similar to the new country, and such an uncanny combination of familiarity and strangeness is to pervade the whole narrative as Pat progressively moves towards self-knowledge. By confronting the foreigner, whom Pat both identifies with and rejects, will make her redefine her identity boundaries as an Irish woman.

“Nomads Seek the Pavilions of Bliss on the Slope of Middle Age” presents three middle-aged female friends that have endorsed “rigid boundaries both of gender and class”

(Ingman 265) at the turn of the twenty-first century, though they remain unsatisfied and “nomadic” in their identity and desire: “Mary catches a glimpse of that morality, glittering and gleaming at the bottom of a dark sexual pool, she knows she had been outside that club all her life” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 99). Mary is the lover of her friend Monica’s husband; the scarlet umbrella borrowed from her friend at the narrative’s opening metaphorically stands for Michael, Monica’s husband. The umbrella motif vaguely recalls Joyce’s “The Sisters,” which has also been discussed in terms of sexuality and repression (Swartzlander 295): “Desire by the priest to live on in his protégé as a father through a son seems to receive symbolic corroboration in the sisters’ drapery shop selling ‘mainly [...] children’s booties and umbrellas.’” (Dilworth 101)

Brenda, the protagonist of “Oleander,” travels to Italy on holiday, firmly believing she had abandoned her ambition to become a woman writer: “The novel had been autobiographical, a portrait of the artist as a young woman, and had enjoyed the limited success of such works in Ireland, at that time, when anything written by a young woman was a rarity and a cause of celebration” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 198). Brenda’s time in Italy will make her reconsider her forgotten literary talents. In the pursuit of the literary enterprise, Brenda draws from the Joycean epiphanic pattern: “Be concise. Keep your eye on the ball. Create epiphanies. Focus on the single moment of revelation. Cut out all superfluous words.” (*The Pale God of Alaska* 204)

For both Joyce and Ní Dhuibhne, Dublin emerges as a “referential field upon which one can register meaning and establish connections” (Dunn and Morris 31). Both writers explore the gap between ordinary Dublin and those landmarks whose political and cultural significance represent how difficult it is to construct a homogeneous Irish identity, and

both explore the legacy of Ireland's colonial experience. As Benstock has suggested, in *Dubliners* "700 years of English rule weigh heavily in the atmosphere of these stories" (46), which in Ní Dhuibhne also extends to patriarchal domination and capitalist exploitation of the land, as shown in, among other narratives, "The Pale Gold of Alaska."

The routes of Joyce's characters through the streets of Dublin reveal the ubiquity of Ireland's colonial past: as Jim Haughey has noticed, in "Two Gallants" "Corley and Leneham's odyssey through the heart of Dublin takes the reader on a tour of several centuries of Irish history" (356). Rutland Square, Trinity College, Kildare Street, the Duke's Lawn or Dame Street remind the reader of the extent of Anglo-Irish influence on Irish history. In *The Pale Gold of Alaska* female characters experience different types of colonisation (political, cultural, patriarchal, capitalist), to be reflected in the stories' geography, as the protagonist of "The Day Elvis Presley Died" suggests: "The name of the lake [Lake George, New York], which is stiff and upright, old-fashioned, the name of an English king. It is not the only name this lake has. Before it got its very English, very unsuitable name, it had an equally unsuitable, very French name, which it had been given by Jesuit priests from Canada. A very Catholic name. And since the lake was clearly in place before those priests arrived here, it must have had another name too, an Indian name, rough-hewn and exotic as the names of the mountains which encircle it. The Adirondacks." (*The Pale God of Alaska* 69)

The individual tours which both Joyce and Ní Dhuibhne's *Dubliners* undertake reveal a geopolitical reality signalling at a colonised past which continues to exert control and fix the other by neutralising difference (Nash 49). Like "The Pale Golf of Alaska" and "The Day Elvis Presley Died," "At Sally Gap" partly takes place in an amazing natural spot scarred by the imprint of civilization. Revealingly, the overwhelming beauty of the scenery unveils dark episodes of the history of British colonisation: "Sally Gap" is actually a saddle part of the military road which the British constructed to

control the city of Dublin, and Glendalough, the renowned monastic settlement which the protagonists visit, was partly destroyed by English troops in 1398. Orla, the female protagonist of the narrative, is a Dubliner settled in Bangor, Wales: non-coincidentally, the place brings to mind the defeat of Welsh aspirations of independence, since Beaumaris Castle, located in the Island of Anglesey facing Bangor, was there erected by Edward I as part of his campaign to conquer North Wales in 1282.

Joyce's "The Dead" completes the pattern of the "spiritual history" of Ireland by conjugating previous elements disseminated in the preceding stories, by amplifying some others, and by presenting Gabriel Conroy's metaphorical coming of age through spiritual revelation. Ní Dhuibhne's female protagonist of "At Sally Gap," Orla, is also a middle-aged Dubliner, an intellectual and emotional exile, whose identity is metamorphosing physically —as troubled by menopause— and also spiritually, as she reassesses her relationship with her Irish past through her sexual encounters with her lover and brother-in-law Patrick, along with the revival of memories of her recently deceased mother. References to this unstable, fluid conception of identity, which constantly reshapes and rebuilds itself, are stated at the narrative's opening, where a clear intertextual parallel is established with Ní Dhuibhne's *Bildungsroman The Dancers Dancing* (1999), Ní Dhuibhne's tale of "female coming of age" (St Peter 30) through the metaphorical journey of her protagonist, also called Orla. In turn, Ní Dhuibhne also establishes a clear intertextual dialogue with W.B. Yeats's "Among School Children," a meditation on love, life and the creative process produced in the poet's full maturity, whose final lines Orla recalls in her meditations:

There are other kinds of ecstasy, apart from
sexual passion. Transcendence, via nature,
beauty, contemplation. Solitude. The cloud of
unknowing, the centre of the circle, the dancer

and the dace. Intellectual ecstasy, so unfashionable it is seldom talked of, hardly acknowledged. The passion of the mind intensely at work, grappling with a problem, arriving at a solution. The passion of the exploring mind making a discovery, experiencing illumination. (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 150)

Like Yeats's persona —riddled by the tension between sexual desire and intellectual activity, mind and body— Orla looks for a tentative solution to solve the paradox of discerning the dancer from the dance; like Gabriel Conroy, Orla is unable to solve the conflict between her civilised and passionate self.

Similarly, “At Sally Gap” provides a commentary on the nature of love and how this is affected by the passage of time and, above all, the story dramatises the troubled relationship of a woman outside Ireland who experiences a sense of dislocation, which brings about the need to recover her identity ties with her homeland. Moreover, “At Sally Gap” also addresses the physical and emotional changes of a woman at the threshold of maturity by mapping her changing moods and desire, as well as her difficulties in filling her time —now her children are gone— living under the long shadow of her husband's prominence as a university professor:

He knew much more than she did about medieval literature, about mythology, about the classics, about history: his general knowledge relating to anything up to about 1900 was immense. She had always deferred to him there. But he knew nothing about contemporary life, literature, culture, politics. So a balance was struck. Orla did not feel second-class or inferior. Even though she had never had a full-time job, even though she spent a great deal of her time at home, planting flowers in her lovely, crowded,

higgledly-piggledy conservatory and quaint old garden, and looking after the house which is full of unevenly floored, lopsided rooms, she felt his equal. Even though he earned most of the money and the prestige” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 157)

Orla discovers at middle age that marrying her husband had by no means been “the zenith of her career” (*The Pale God of Alaska* 156), as she had previously thought, and that her conventional role as wife and mother, exiled from her country, has derived into frustration and dissatisfaction with herself and with her former life. When Orla’s mother dies, she travels to Dublin to attend her funeral, and there meets again her lover Patrick, also her brother-in-law married to her sister Kathleen. Together they visit Glendalough, but on their return Orla’s sister suspects their relationship: Orla abruptly leaves for Wales the next morning. The passage is relevant for Orla’s development as a character, since the anecdote will bring about a shameful suspension of her already weak bonds with her family and her homeland, marking her definite exile from her Irish roots.

When travelling from Holyhead to Dublin through the Irish Sea, Orla retraces a short, familiar path which separates two worlds often in conflict, feeling at ease with neither of them: “That’s all it takes, to cross the mythical stretch of water, the stretch that separates two civilizations, so insistent on their difference. That is all it takes to be in exile. One and a half hours by Seacat” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 169). Orla’s relationship with her mother mirrors Orla and Aunt Annie’s in *The Dancers Dancing*, who, according to Ní Dhuibhne herself, “would be pleased to break the link with their Irish and Gaelic past, although they would not take the responsibility for making that break nor for killing the Irish language.” (Moloney 104)

As a young woman, Orla would despise her mother’s firm Irish roots and language: “When Orla had been young she

hated this habit. She had been convinced that her mother was using her quaint old expressions on purpose to irritate and upset her children” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 153). In “The Dead” Gabriel is also accused by Miss Ivors of being pro-British, a “West Briton,” which provokes Gabriel’s eventual exasperation and indelicate response: “‘Well,’ said Gabriel, ‘if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language.’ [...] ‘o, to tell you the truth,’ retorted Gabriel suddenly, ‘I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!’” (*D* 170)

However, through her years of exile, and especially after her mother’s death, Orla has learnt to appreciate the value of the traditional Ireland which her mother represents, coming to an acceptance of this connection: “Now Orla wished that she had taken notes. She wished she could speak like that herself. The English of Forth and Bary. Mixed up with the English of Rathmines, the English of RTÉ, and other kinds as well.” (*The Pale God of Alaska* 153)

Orla’s encounter with her sister and brother-in-law — significantly called Kathleen and Patrick, as traditional female and male representations of Ireland, Kathleen Ní Houlihan and St Patrick, respectively—is also related to the awakening of her dormant sexual desire: “They [Orla and her husband] never made love —her choice, but he didn’t seem to notice, or mind much if he did. He was the typically absent-minded professor. His life lived inside his own head” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 158–9). With Patrick Orla travels to Glendalough; in that amazing natural spot Orla experiences again the intensity of sexual ecstasy:

Her body [Orla’s] copes admirably with the occasion. She is excited, passionately excited, from the moment he takes her hand to help her over the heather. His hand is big, hot, helpful. Its touch on her waist, as he propels her along, makes her want to cry for joy. His touch on her face, as they lie on the rug, sheltered by the high rough growth, makes her laugh. That this can

happen. That it can still happen. (*The Pale God of Alaska* 163)

As is the case with Joyce's "The Dead," "At Sally Gap" seems to be construed according to a temporal progression which moves towards a narrative denouement, which however challenges traditional articulations of such a progression. The conclusions which Orla draws from her journey to Ireland and from her renewed burst of sexuality is uncertain and contradictory: "She will never go back to Ireland. She will never see Patrick again. And she will not miss him. That is what she believes, for the moment" (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 170). The emotional implications of Orla's quest remain veiled at the narrative's closure. Similarly, if the narrative of "The Dead" reflects temporal movement in its construction, "what 'truth' or 'meaning' does the story illuminate at the end —particularly, what 'truth' does Gabriel Conroy come to recognize at the end of his tale?" (Murphy 465). Gabriel's musings at the closing of "The Dead" have been interpreted in divergent ways by the critics: Gabriel may achieve "a vision of possible renewal for himself and for his country" (Coward 504), or simply he is left with a void, a "bleak comic abyss." (Doherty 235)

In "At Sally Gap," Orla, unaccompanied by her husband Kenneth, undergoes the trip that Gabriel plans at the end of the story, "the time had come for him to set out on his journey westward" (*D* 202). It seems clear that the discernment of Gabriel's "truth" is coupled with the significance of the character's future plans, which Florence Walzl has read in the following terms:

The east is the direction of Gabriel's holiday escapes to freedom on the continent ... and the west is associated with his final vision of the graveyard. However, it soon becomes evident that Joyce is developing, side by side with this east-west symbolic pattern, another one that is

its opposite in certain ways. In this system the east suggests the old, traditional, and effete; the west, the new, primitive, and vital.” (Walzl 22)

The west contains the key to Gabriel and Orla's movement towards self-knowledge. Like Gabriel, Orla has also travelled extensively to the continent: “He [Orla's husband] never went to Ireland. It was too like Wales; he didn't like it. During the summer they went to the south of France. They have a cottage, smaller than the house at Bangor but not altogether dissimilar, in the Cevennes” (Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale God of Alaska* 164). Like Gabriel's, Orla's journey “westward” will bring about an encounter with ancient Ireland through her experience at Glendalough, as well as with a more primitive, vital self which the discovery of her dormant sexual desire provides.

Inasmuch as Gretta's love story with Michael Furey, “At Sally Gap” also delves on issues which suggest passion, desire, and silence. The intertextual reference to Romeo and Juliet's passionate *Liebestod* is ironically contrasted with Gabriel's over-romanticised memories of his relationship with Gretta, not only to discover that his sexual needs will be unrequited, but also that he has no place in Gretta's tale of love, passion and death. Similarly, Orla states that her husband Kenneth, a specialist in Chaucer, is the “typical absent-minded professor,” who has devoted “years of his life” to academic research on “The Wife of Bath” (*The Pale God of Alaska* 159). Significantly, Kenneth seems to know little about most major issues addressed by Chaucer: like the Knight in the tale, he ignores what women want, which obviously and primarily extends to his intellectual and physical relationship with his own wife (*The Pale God of Alaska* 158). Unlike “The Dead,” the adulterous relationship between Orla and Patrick remains a secret in the narrative. However, since Ní Dhuibhne's narrative is focalised through the eyes of the female character—unlike Joyce's final section of “The Dead,” largely focalised through Gabriel's vision—other secrets concerning Kenneth's sexual behaviour may remain untold. Gabriel's suspicions about

Gretta —“Perhaps she had not told him all the story” (*D* 201)— are also true about Kenneth.

Garry Leonard has defined “The Dead” as the individuals’ “attempt to rule over their personal worlds of identity confusion, shifting modes of subjectivity, and unpredictable suspensions of conscious thought” (291).

Through the course of the narrative, Gabriel Conroy attempts to “confirm the fictional unity of his masculine subjectivity” (Leonard 289) with three different women. Orla undergoes a similar search, with one large difference, as the reference to Yeats’s dancer seems to suggest: she is conscious of her internal splitting, which not only applies to her sexuality (posed between intellectual and carnal love, unable to conjugate both in her own married life), but also to her national identity as an Irish woman living in Great Britain.

As a conclusion, and through the course of this essay, I have explored the aesthetic and ideological possibilities which Joyce’s *Dubliners* offers to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s *The Pale Gold of Alaska*, not only as a “template” to short story writing in Ireland, but also as backbone to Ní Dhuibhne’s collection. As above suggested, the echoes of Joyce’s *Dubliners* resonate in Ní Dhuibhne’s women *Dubliners*, that both draw and depart from Joyce’s. Ní Dhuibhne shares with Joyce the concern to reflect in a “nicely polished looking-glass” the spiritual, political, and moral crisis that pervades *Dubliners*, thus conceiving of the story series as a first step towards the liberation of Ireland as a country. Along with Joyce, Ní Dhuibhne depicts a series of portraits of *Dubliners* engaged in an identity quest, and in this she also seems to privilege some characters’ relationship with art and literature as an emancipatory force, which is not always, however, entirely successful. However, Ní Dhuibhne’s privileges the female perspective, which has the effect of providing women’s counter narrative for predominantly male accounts of Ireland’s historical present and past. *The Pale Gold of Alaska* presents a series of stories determined by women’s physical and

emotional exile, while also addressing how such a liminal position affects their identity as Irish women. Ní Dhuibhne's portrait of women as individuals that have traditionally been excluded from the process of national identity formation destabilises official, male-centred historical narratives by presenting voices that inhabit liminality, thus underscoring the limits of nation-states and of the national political conscience that characterises them and that we have all deeply interiorised. While firmly rooted in Dublin in identitary terms, Joyce's and Ní Dhuibhne's characters however come together in an agonising attempt to trespass national boundaries, in an effort which questions the foundations upon which issues related to national identity rest.

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Note

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