

## ‘THE THEATRE OF THE FAMILY’: AN IRISH APPROACH TO GENDER AWARENESS IN CATHERINE DUNNE’S FICTION<sup>1 2</sup>

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**Abstract:** Catherine Dunne’s fiction masterly portrays ordinary themes like family relations and the process of identity formation, and she criticises the constraining elements that thwart female subjectivity in Ireland. However, as I intend to argue in this article, by bringing to the fore the diverse ways whereby women transcend the social, psychological or material barriers that the Irish family ideology and the rhetorics of maternity have traditionally set upon them, Dunne emphasizes the need to re-think the social and individual implications that these obstacles entail, insofar as the rearticulation of their conventional significance constitutes a catalyst for women’s attainment of self-discovery.

**Keywords:** Catherine Dunne; contemporary Irish women’s fiction; female subjectivity; divorce in Ireland; gender awareness.

**Title in Spanish:** “El teatro de la familia”: una aproximación irlandesa a la conciencia de género en la narrativa de Catherine Dunne

**Resumen:** La narrativa de Catherine Dunne describe temas cotidianos como las relaciones familiares y la construcción de la identidad, y critica los elementos que delimitan la subjetividad femenina en Irlanda. Sin embargo, como intentaré demostrar en este artículo, al resaltar cómo las mujeres trascienden los obstáculos sociales, psicológicos y materiales que la ideología de la familia y la retórica de la maternidad les han impuesto tradicionalmente en Irlanda, Dunne enfatiza la necesidad de cuestionar las implicaciones sociales e individuales de dichas barreras, dado que la rearticulación de su significación convencional constituye un elemento de cambio hacia la consecución de la plena conciencia femenina.

**Palabras clave:** Catherine Dunne; narrativa irlandesa contemporánea de mujeres; subjetividad femenina; el divorcio en Irlanda; conciencia de género.

Catherine Dunne’s production comprises eight novels, *In the Beginning* (1997), *A Name for Himself* (1998), *The Walled Garden* (2000), *Another Kind of Life* (2003), *Something Like Love* (2006), *At a Time like This* (2008), *Set in Stone* (2009) and *Missing Julia* (2010); the non-fiction piece *An Unconsidered People* (2003), which is a shattering account of the

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lives of Irish emigrants to London during the 1950s; and finally, a number of short stories published in different collections and anthologies, like *Irish Girls about Town* (2004), *Travelling Light* (2005) and *Scéalta* (2006), among others. Most recently, she has contributed to the volume *The Death of a Child* (2011), in which several authors narrate personal stories on the loss of children, in her case "Eoin", her stillborn son. Dunne's work constitutes, to my mind, an excellent example of that latest trend of Irish writing not only drawing on the ongoing renovation of the Irish cultural order but also, and most significantly, providing a new representative framework for the recurrent failings that still lie beneath the milieu of post-Celtic tiger Ireland. By means of characters' voicing, the author articulates a groundbreaking ethos in which unbiased interpretations of the systems of gender coding and identity formation begin to be accommodated. Thus, a wide range of women figures abound in her fiction and although she does not consider herself a feminist writer, practices of resistance and social transgression characterise many of her female protagonists.<sup>3</sup> Through them she depicts and criticises the various ideological and cultural artefacts that have determined the forging of female identity in Ireland while also allowing for more optimistic possibilities of women's subjectivity. Most particularly, as will be discussed here, Dunne brings to the fore the diverse ways whereby women manage to transcend the social, psychological or material barriers that the rhetorics of the family and the discourse of maternity continue to set upon them. She emphasises then, the importance of re-thinking the social and individual implications that these barriers entail, insofar as the rearticulation of their conventional significance may serve as a catalyst for women's attainment of self-discovery.

In an attempt to illustrate Dunne's successful reconfiguration of the usually tragic meanings of family interaction and mother-daughter relationships, in this article I will look at how women's realization of their inner self is delineated in her fiction, covering her earliest novel *In the Beginning* and its sequel *Something like Love*, as well as her widely acclaimed *The Walled Garden*.<sup>4</sup> In these texts she portrays her female protagonists as going through a process of identity formation that moves from emotional desolation, occasioned by the metanarratives that permeated the status quo of the Ireland they lived in, to a complete sense of self-awareness, thus depicting a social landscape in which women end up not only renovated but also reconciled with themselves.

In the opening pages of her comprehensive study *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Christine St. Peter criticises the fact that even though it is widely known within the international community that Ireland has experienced a rapid social transformation during the past few decades, little attention has been paid to the central role of Irish women's writing in shaping those increasingly evident changes. She views as remarkable the achievements of these writers in revising the past, reconceptualising the present and building up the future. Particularly, she extols.

<sup>3</sup> For a further analysis of the common reluctance of contemporary women authors to fall under this categorization as well as the examination of the intersection of feminist writing and Irish identity see St. Peter (2000: 151).

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, the title *In the Beginning* will be abbreviated to *IB*, *Something like Love* to *SLL* and *The Walled Garden* to *TWG* in the quotations.

that form of representation within which, and by means of which, women are being constituted as new kinds of subjects: artistic work that enables women to discover or to create places from which to speak. This is the achievement of contemporary Irish women's fiction, yet the magnitude of these changes is largely unknown outside Ireland, often unacknowledged even within. (2000: 3)

This article sets out to argue that fictional works have been particularly relevant for cultural and literary progress. That writing has come from an extensive group of women novelists whose concern has been to deconstruct long-established parameters that have constrained the development of female subjectivity in Ireland. By engaging freely with contentious issues, their narratives establish mechanisms through which their characters destabilise the usual forces of power. This is in contrast to earlier prevailing modes of gender coding wherein controversial views were ignored, muted, or circumvented, possibly for the sake of national stability.

Echoing St Peter's claim for the prominent location of women writers in the shaping of contemporary Irish cultural consciousness, it is my belief that Dunne's production exemplifies such a role. It seems fair to note at this stage that, indeed, she has received wide critical acclaim and recognition in international circles –mostly in Italy, where her production is extensively known and translated–, whereas her work has been insufficiently examined in her own country.<sup>5</sup> Reviewers of her narratives have praised her engaging prose, the long-lasting and touching impression she makes upon the reader and her capacity for enticing deeper reflections about ordinary themes. It is precisely this ordinariness that is most remarkable, not only for its recurrence in her fiction, but also because that very quality actually highlights the little tragedies that affect human relationships in everyday contexts. It is those events that have a significant impact upon identity formation within what Dunne calls "the theatre of the family". To quote Arminta Wallace, the author "gives a voice to the sort of contemporary characters which Irish fiction tends to ignore, or leave to the romance writers" (1999: n.p.); her aim is to raise awareness about the need to hear the interior self of individual Irish people.<sup>6</sup>

That view of Dunne's narratives would be endorsed by Gerry Smyth's argument in *The Novel and the Nation*, where he indicates the sociological purpose that characterised the production of the emerging Irish fiction writers of the 1990s. As he puts it: "less of an intellectual and more of an artisan, the new Irish novelist is concerned to narrate the nation as it has been and as it is, rather than how it should be or might have been" (1997: 177). Smyth sharply observed the shift towards sociological themes and away from politicised issues that Irish authors were displaying in their works at the end of the twentieth century. A similar perception was later held by scholars like Jennifer Jeffers and Eve Patten in their

<sup>5</sup> Quite accurately, María Amor Barros del Río includes Dunne in the list of contemporary authors who are "currently claiming for closer attention to the innovations introduced by them not only in relation to subject matters but also to form" (2005: 105, my translation). Other names are Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Evelyn Conlon, Mary Morrissy, Maeve Binchy, Emma Donoghue, Maeve Kelly, Mary Rose Callaghan, Leland Bardwell, among many others.

<sup>6</sup> In line with the ideas delineated by St. Peter, the author and literary critic Christine Dwyer Hickey points out that "Dunne's strength as a writer has always been an ability to stand back and allow her characters, real or imagined, to speak for themselves" (2006: n. p.)

respective surveys of the contemporary Irish novel (2002 and 2006).<sup>7</sup> Among the broad spectrum of subjects that these critics deal with, particularly resonant are historical revision, the feminine ethos, the construction of subjectivity and its relation with the country-city dialectics, the role of the economy on Irish identity or the articulation of corporeality. Arguably, all of them have been increasingly incorporated to the literary representation of Ireland undertaken by fiction writers on the isle. Patten contends that “the Irish novel highlighted the institutional and ideological failings of the country, tracing the halting progress of Ireland’s cultural, sexual and economic evolution, and foregrounding its voices of dissent” (2006: 259). In the case of Jeffers, she underscores the deconstruction of “the power matrix” that fiction writers have been committed to, in an attempt to reformulate the restrictive parameters of gender coding. This leads to the fact that, she maintains, “Irish culture is in a state of becoming”, an ethos that is constantly created and recreated through social and textual practices (7).

The notions of dissent and becoming are precisely at the core of the main story line of Dunne’s *In the Beginning*. The events alternately appear as experienced by the female and the male protagonists, although they are mostly focused on Rose, a middle-class wife and mother from suburban Dublin. Oscillating between flashbacks to the 1970s and the present, the narration describes how she was leading a normal domestic existence with her three children and her husband, but suddenly she undergoes an emotional and economic crisis when the man, Ben, leaves them to start a relationship with another woman. From then on, Rose epitomises the author’s reflection on the obstacles that emerge for women in this kind of situations. These range from psychologically coping with an unexpectedly new social state, dealing with financial problems or becoming the head of a dysfunctional family. Progressively, though, the protagonist manages to reorganise her life not only by setting up an increasingly popular and successful company, but also by becoming aware of her own subjectivity.

Contextually, *In the Beginning* locates itself in the aftermath of the second Divorce Referendum that took place in Ireland in late 1995. Dunne had been politically active during that campaign as well as in the former 1986 one, working on both occasions in favour of the legislation that would grant the Irish population the same rights that citizens of other European countries had already received in the previous decades.<sup>8</sup> In an interview, she has admitted that some of the human stories that she got to know during those years became a source of inspiration for the novel. Her interest focussed particularly on the need to portray how women were affected by what has been called “divorce Irish-style”, that is, when the husband abandons the family home and simply leaves for England. Dunne comments on this in the following terms:

<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Rebecca Pelan underscores the challenge to dominant ideologies that has characterised the work of contemporary Irish women writers since the 1970s. Thematically, she suggests, they have done “another conquest” by treating topics that were excessively mythologised and historically silenced: “‘Undoing the conquest’ of British imperialist takes a back seat in this writing to that other conquest –that of women– whereby issues of parental and church control, sexuality, lesbianism, abortion, incest and domestic violence are central” (1999: 127).

<sup>8</sup> An extensive review of the introduction of divorce legislation in Ireland and its socio-cultural implications can be found in Wood and O’Shea (1997).

We've always had a tendency in Ireland to export our social problems to Britain, such as working class mass emigration to Britain and also to USA, when there was no employment here, or thousands of women who go to London every year because we have no abortion legislation that works in this country. This was yet another kind of strand in the hypocrisy where, although we had no legislation for divorce, there was no mechanism to bring back those men and make them responsible for supporting their family. For many women I spoke to, both in the first campaign and in the second one, there was a common tale that the main difficulty was not that the marriage had ended, although that in itself was very traumatic, but how it had ended. (Pérez Vides 2002: 235)

The various sides of this emotional trauma are predicated in the novel through the frequent moments of puzzlement and alienation that fill up Rose's existence once she is downgraded to the rather stigmatised category of "deserted wife": "Rose felt that this was happening to somebody else. She began to be detached from her body. The words 'deserted wife' blazed in front of her eyes" (*IB*: 21). Not only are her childhood dreams for a perfect marriage completely shattered overnight, but she has to take up duties that patriarchal education and social norms had never taught her to perform, like household head responsibilities and lone maternity. Ben's carelessness about the future of his family throws her into a world of worries and fears that firstly freeze her but later activate her struggle to depart from them. The solitude and vulnerability suffered by women like her are perfectly captured and illustrated by Dunne, engaged as she is in describing the helplessness that recurrently characterises the early stages of their life during marital breakdown. This is voiced through comments like "She did not want to talk to anyone. The sense of humiliation was intense, physically painful" or "This was full of shame. She wasn't able to hold on to her husband. He no longer loved her. She was worthless, the one to blame" (*IB*: 14-15)

However, a feminist reading of this story can be based on the fact that from the early chapters of the book, Dunne demonstrates how those barriers and initial traumas can indeed be overcome by women like Rose, and that is, to my mind, the author's major achievement. Constantly aware of her limits but refusing to thrust herself upon grief and regret, after one day Rose is determined to save her own life and that of her children, so that a new future may spread out for them all: "The total misery of the first twenty-four hours had changed into a will to survive, to come out on top of all this. That was even more important than what to tell the children" (*IB*: 32). For this purpose, Rose takes advantage of her own skills and resources, and decides to use her own kitchen as the location for a catering company, the new job that would sustain the family economy from then on. "For the first time in her life Rose knew what it was to take pride in your work", reflects the narrator at a significant point of her renewal (*IB*: 154). The enormous change that this momentum entails for Rose allows her not only to discover a sense of self-esteem that had been concealed during her years of marriage but also a more realistic perspective of those former times as well as an optimistic view about the future. Thus, the new Rose ironically thinks that "What she used to do for love, she now did for money. But that, she reflected, was the way of the world. Homage to home and housewife was just so much cant" (*IB*: 154). This realisation constitutes a major step forward in Dunne's critique of the lethargy that encapsulates the role of women within the microcosm of the family. On a wider canvas, it also illustrates a claim for the subversion of the limited social participation of women sustained by patriarchy. As

the novel progresses, readers become acquainted with Rose's gradual transformation into a resolute woman who leaves all her prejudices and worries aside, and succeeds at the same time in keeping within her home a feeling of family that would remain intact, despite its dysfunctionality. The following passage is quite illustrative in this respect:

She saw her next life as very different, her second chance. Her new beginning. There was nobody to protect her. Nobody to give her even the illusion of protecting her. She was responsible for herself and three other people, whom she would not shelter as thoroughly as her mother had sheltered her. That was the difference. That was how you learned to put shape on yourself. [...] With her own children she would do better. She would teach them that there were choices to be made, not simply roads to be followed. (*IB*: 275)

There is an added dimension to female transformation in the novel that I find fascinating, and it has to do with the use of religious discourse. With the title of *In the Beginning*, Dunne emulates the words that inaugurate the biblical book of Genesis, in which we are told how God created the world and all its creatures after reordering the pre-existing chaos. This metaphor of Rose as a modern goddess creating her own new world is recurrent in the book, and it suggests, on the one hand, the need to question the grip that catholic dogmas have had over the configuration of female identity in Ireland. The hegemony of catholic morality in the Irish process of nation building is by now a well-trodden field of study, and there has been a widespread critical insistence on how women on the isle were prevented from transcending the patriarchal parameters that the agents of religious and political power established for them.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Rose's creative impulse can be interpreted as an insight into the possibilities granted for women like her once they are rendered capable of creating and recreating their own life and surroundings. This idea is significantly conveyed by the narrator in the following manner: "Wednesday. Day three. Maybe the world was created in seven days after all. A lot could happen in forty-eight hours" (*IB*: 49). Similarly, the male pronoun in the biblical phrase "And the seventh day, he rested", is substituted in the novel by a "she," and the fact that this comment closes the last chapter of the first part of the novel hints at how Dunne allows for Rose to reinvent her universe (*IB*: 127). This by no means implies that to cope with unexpected divorce and its subsequent consequences can happen in one week. Yet, it allows Dunne to explore the emotional and psychological wavering that women like Rose can endure when dealing with this issue and the time that may take for them to realise what inner resources they have to restore their subjectivity and their family situation.

It is in *Something like Love* where we can most clearly confirm that the materialisation of this intrinsic worth has finally resulted into a complete reconfiguration of her subjectivity. In the very first pages of the book we find a self-confident and humorous Rose joking with her partner in what is now an enlarged and successful catering business. Eight years have passed since she was suddenly left alone with her children, but during that lapse of time,

<sup>9</sup> Further analysis on the Catholic order underlying a great part of Ireland's cultural identity in the past century and the extent of the theocratic nature of the island can be found in Tom Inglis's study *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (1998) and Mary Kenny's *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (2000), to name but a few.

her social, economic and family horizons have been expanded. Yet, we soon become aware that however successful she has been, because no steps towards divorce were taken by either side, she has lived all those years in the unstable world of separation that in *In the Beginning* she had described as “a long, slow funeral. Only I have no body to bury” (*IB*: 277). This controversy was indeed the catalyst for further reflection on the full application of divorce legislation in Ireland, that is, on how women, seemingly liberated from traditional delimitations, remain locked into the system of gender coding and mostly, legal action. Thus, if the two novels are examined together, Rose’s final reflections in *In the Beginning* still resonate when we start reading *Something like Love*:

Rose was learning that the law was very slow. For ordinary people and their problems, for divorce, Irish-style, it had nothing to offer. She felt that she had no rights. She was no longer half of a respectable, solid, middle-class couple. Instead, she was half of nothing. Everything now depended on Ben, on finding him, on clearing up this mess, on getting his agreement. Without that, she was in the ‘no-woman’s land of separation. And she was waiting, again. She didn’t want to spend any more of her life waiting. (*IB*: 272-273)

However, the protagonist’s sense of accomplishment that can be noticed at the beginning of the second novel is broken when, with the same impetuosity with which he left, the runaway husband is now back to their lives, trying to catch up as if nothing had happened and under the excuse of being extremely interested in “regularising their position” so that everyone wins (*SLL*: 32). Unfortunately, and using Christine Dwyer Hickey’s words, “Rose is once again left to shoulder it all. She must break the news to the kids (two young men and a teenage girl), which she does admirably and without once bad-mouthing the ex. At the same time she has to hang onto all she has worked for in the past eight years, including the house” (2006: n.p.). By emphasizing this common occurrence in contexts of marital breakdown, we hear again a critique of how the nature of the separation and divorce process always keeps women in a rather victimised position. Simultaneously, it stresses the irony behind their assignment to deal with the more unpleasant aspects of it, as we learn through Rose when she complains to her friend: “It’s ironic, isn’t it? [...] Me sitting here all those years ago wondering how on earth I was going to tell my kids their father had left. Now, here I am again, wondering how in God’s name I’m going to tell them that he’s back” (*SLL*: 44).

The legal procedures for their divorce are soon set in motion, but before any step is taken, Rose decides to have a plan in order to foresee her husband’s movements. With the aid of her lawyer and her accountant, she delineates the terms of the negotiation with Ben and she insists that things will be carried out in her own way and at her own pace. Far from her former existence as selfless wife and mother, the battle for divorce and for the salvation of her family awakens a sense of objectivity in her attitude that is later transformed into the renewal of her self. This dialectic acquires a deeper significance when set against the patriarchal understanding of gender that has characterised the Irish milieu of the twentieth century, and it clearly echoes the *bildungsroman* tradition that Dunne draws on.<sup>10</sup> In this particular case,

<sup>10</sup> For further insights into the reshaping of this traditionally male convention carried out by Irish women writers, see Eve Patten (2006) and Anne Owens Weekes (1995).

the divorce background in the novel adds an interesting element to female awakening. It has to do with the dialectic categorisation of women involved in these circumstances that has been usually envisioned by the Irish collective psyche. Carol Coulter offers an interesting outlook to this situation when analysing the different lines of argument during the 1986 and 1995 divorce campaigns in her article "Hello Divorce, Goodbye Daddy". She refers to the several images that anti-divorce campaigners projected of women:

When society allows divorce, it promotes the predator female at the expense of the dutiful wife, and it rewards the man who abandons his responsibilities in order to pursue the pleasures of sex. These two female models –the faithful wife and mother, devoted only to her home and family, whose satisfaction lies in providing for their well-being, and the sexually active predator working woman, whose priorities are self-gratification through career, money and sex– ran like a red thread through the debate. (1997: 286)

Dunne locates Rose in between these two models. The author carefully articulates her protagonist's gradual process of identity formation by rendering her equally aware of the central role occupied by her family and her self-development in the new existence that she was starting to create. This discernment, nonetheless, would have been thwarted by the stagnant position of her former ego in *In the Beginning*.

Not surprisingly, in the sequel Ben does not pay attention to any of Rose's warnings, but she is depicted as not innocent anymore. Dunne insists on that change by making her not only control the situation but also the discourse she uses when addressing him in their conversation about the terms of their divorce. Very illustrative in this sense is Rose's attitude at an encounter with Ben in the neutral territory of the Gresham Hotel in Dublin, where they meet to discuss the future of their house and negotiate what each of them would get:

I am nothing but a tough negotiation on legs, wearing a new suit and expensive clothes, that's all. 'It's not your house, it's the family home. You walked out eight years ago and you've still never paid a penny towards it, or your family. You'll see that all I have deducted is what you owe.' [...] She sat back. She raised her hand, just a fraction: but it was enough. Astonishment seemed to silence him. 'I'm not finished, Ben. There's not a court in the land that would force me to sell my children's home, not a judge anywhere that would absolve you of what you owe. This is a generous offer, and it's based on the highest of three estate agents' valuations. I'm not going to sit here and listen to any more of your fatherly concern. Stay as long as you like– I've already paid the bill'. And she turned back, counting the steps to the dining room floor. She was left with a vivid image of her husband, red-faced, open-mouthed. Round one, she thought, as she hailed a taxi. I think that went rather well. (*SLL*: 286-287)

Rose is now a well documented, resourceful and determined woman involved in a divorce case that she is not willing to lose. Actually, she ends up buying the house from her husband, not with the intention of living there, but of making a profit out of what she helped build and maintain, and break free from her past.

In *The Walled Garden*, Dunne's fascination with the ordinary and her engagement with women's maturity by way of family connections can also be clearly ascertained. She has admitted that "much of a society is reflected in the claustrophobia of family relationships



going through conflicts. So, while you don't set out to write about politics, if you're dealing with people obviously they have to reflect the society they come from, even if you reject that society" (Moloney and Thompson 2003: 38). Thus, in her third novel the author explores a conflictive mother-daughter relation by means of the letters written by Alice, the mother, before she suffers a fatal stroke that keeps her in bed. Throughout her comatose state, she is taken care of by Beth, the prodigal daughter that had abandoned the family home in order to live an independent life in England, and by Beth's faithful brother, James. In the letters, Alice remembers key moments of the family life both before and after her beloved husband died and by addressing her daughter through writing, she tries to disclose the obstacles of their mutual understanding, which prevailed along their shared process of maturity. This blending of epistolary form and common narrative also accounts for Dunne's experimentation with form, as she did in *In the Beginning*. Anne Fogarty suggests that this device enables the author to "interweave the different stories and subtly expose their psychic interdependence as well as their long-standing rivalries" (2000: n.p.). Further, resembling the case of in *In the Beginning*, the choice of title in this novel is far from innocent. Apart from making reference to the dead father's passion for gardening, the motif of the garden, according to María Amor Barros, is a metaphor of how Alice had seen herself, that is, as a "walled garden", a paradise in custody with fences that protected it all from the outer world" (2003: 289).

Throughout the novel, the emotional and ideological encounters between the two women manifest the gap that always existed between their two generations, but it is only when the life-threatening consequences of her illness prove unavoidable that Alice decides to unfold her inner feelings to her daughter, at the same time letting her know that she had always understood her. The problem, Alice makes clear, was that the social expectations and parameters in which they had been educated were certainly different in each case:

I belonged too much to the old school, I think, where children had to be seen and not heard. You certainly didn't seem to be aware of that piece of old wisdom –you fought very hard indeed for your right to be heard. You were, I think, that word which I rarely hear applied to children nowadays –wilful. I'm sure now that it wasn't right to try and bend that will as much as I did. You insisted on being yourself, and I think you were right to do so. My generation understood a lot about duty to others, and very little about duty to ourselves. (*TWG*: 119)

In the case of Beth, her return to Dublin and the family home bring about a new dimension to her subjectivity. This can be grasped from the moment she discovers the first letter as she admits that going through those pages "had awakened more than old memories" (*TWG*: 69). Spatial distance and generational conflict had rendered both women apart, but the family drama of the mother's sickness appears as the catalyst for self and mutual reconciliation. In other words, Beth acknowledges that "no matter how reluctant she had felt, this time it was the right thing to do, the only one thing to do. She had a sudden vision of herself as, finally, a competent adult –calm, responsible, rising to the crisis" (*TWG*: 7). Nonetheless, once she is fully settled in her family home and background again, this initial determination and alleged maturity are ruptured when she observes the physical degradation of her mother. From then on, Beth notes, "each of them had to play a different role from

the usual. Her mother was unspeaking [...] Beth was neither defensive nor belligerent” (*TWG*: 22).

This personal transformation is masterly constructed by Dunne throughout the novel, as she interweaves the inner feelings of both women with the profound changes that a closer, more intimate contact brings about for them. It is probably more evident in the case of the younger woman, not only because of age and knowledge, but also because of the gradual perception of their shared experiences despite identity gaps and differences. Although Alice seems to have always internalised them, Beth is only aware of their bond at that stage:

Beth had had the sense for the first time ever of starting to untangle all the undergrowth that had stunted her relationship with Alice. She wanted to sit with her again tonight, to wander with her through the timeless space of Singer sewing-machines, walled gardens and green trikes. It was the least she could do: her mother had supplied the maps. (*TWG*: 71)

This emotional discovery entails empathy and reconciliation with her mother, while it also involves a crucial point in the process of the younger woman’s self-discovery which pervades the novel. In other words, the more she reads what her mother had generously left for her, the closer she gets to the old, dying woman but also, and most importantly, to learn and understand what she wants to do from then on. And this is, to my mind, the most compelling quality of Dunne’s novel. Thus, after reading her mother’s last letter Beth deliberates: “She would be back inside her other life soon, would find the time to be quiet and still: time in which she would look for, and discover, the daughter and mother she was now in the process of becoming” (*TWG*: 306).

As suggested above, the main female characters in Dunne’s fiction are everyday women who in different ways and from diverse backgrounds experience a process of transformation in their emotional and psychological reality. Either drawing on the divorce controversy as in the case of *In the Beginning* and *Something like Love*, or the mother-daughter plot in *The Walled Garden*, these three works challenge the traditional discourses that have relegated women to stationary positions. On the contrary, her female characters grow quite visibly in these texts and probably as much as Ireland has grown itself in the recent past. Helen Thompson views it in a similar way when she maintains that in her fiction, Dunne reflects Ireland’s “new affluence, its openness to discussion of social problems, its painful revelations of abuse and dysfunction, and its loosening ties between church and state” (Moloney and Thompson 2003: 31). A closer look at the ordinary, as Dunne seems to suggest, facilitates a reworking of the myths that limit women’s role in society, especially in the articulation of inner selves. Often seen as the source of personal crisis, tragedy and fragmentation, the family is captured as providing the mechanisms to negotiate personal subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> Like

<sup>11</sup> This preoccupation with the family, in its various forms and functionalities, and its regenerative power is indeed the focus of Dunne’s two most recent novels. In *Set in Stone* she explores a woman’s dealing with “the ramifications of dark secrets in [her husband’s] family’s past”, using Catherine Heaney’s words in her review of the novel (2009: n. p.). The protagonist is entangled in a complex scene of recriminations and revenge provoked by the alienated state of her husband’s brother. Eventually, it is her determination and perseverance that save herself and her family. With *Missing Julia*, Dunne revisits the topic of the family by engaging in the dialectics of loyalty and choice as experienced by a woman in “older” age. A decision she took in her former career as a

many other contemporary Irish women novelists, Dunne concentrates on themes that have been much neglected by literary authors and critical theorists, and she sheds some light on how individuation and particularly, gender awareness, can spring from a refreshing approach to the family and the ordinary.

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doctor will haunt her after retirement, affecting the bonds with her partner and her circle of friends. About the impact of these apparently common lives, Dunne herself has stated that "below the surface of what we perceive as ordinary, lies the most extraordinary vein of human experience" (Murray 2011: n. p.).

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