

The postmodern folktales of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

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Abstract: *Although the success of the Irish short story is traditionally put down to the influence of the strong story-telling tradition in Ireland, actual traces of this influence have largely disappeared in recent years. A notable exception to this trend, however, is Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, whose work is heavily indebted to the Irish folklore tradition. In this article I try to determine how ancient folktale and postmodern short story are successfully, yet critically, connected in her collection *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* (1997). The most explicit link between the modern and the myth is provided by Ní Dhuibhne’s feminist re-writing of an Irish fairytale, “The Story of the Little White Goat”. Yet, the use of repetition, the simple and straightforward style and intrusions of the narrator in the other short stories also bear witness to the influence of the oral tradition. In addition, the short stories take over the thematic concerns of love, loss and marriage from the original fairytale. At the same time, however, the short stories also warn against an all too close identification of fantasy and reality, of the folktale and real life.*

I

The remarkable success of the short story in Ireland is usually put down to the lasting influence and powerful heritage of the Irish story-telling tradition. In his early study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice* (1962), Frank O’Connor noticed thematic and formal links between the modern short story and the oral folktale, arguing that in the best short stories “we can hear the tone of a man’s voice speaking”.¹ Later critics further underscored this oral quality of the Irish short story. Terence Brown claims that in the Irish short story “a speaking voice is imitated which [...] is a voice heard over and over again, one that assumes with its audience a shared ownership of the told tale and all that it implies”; Patrick Raffroidi states similarly: “the texture of the Irish story often if not always suggests the influence of fireside gatherings.”² In the seventies and eighties especially, the oral origins of the Irish short stories were investigated in several books and articles, which focused either on the peculiar narrative features of the short story – the (I-)narrator as performer, the use of repetition, the linear progression of time – or on

the story's thematic indebtedness to Irish folklore in its use of mythical or fantastic elements and its familiar opposition of imagination and reality.³ More detailed studies similarly traced the influence of folklore and storytelling in the works of writers as diverse as William Carleton, James Stephens, Frank O'Connor, and Mary Lavin.

In "Story-telling: The Gaelic Tradition", Declan Kiberd follows the lead of most of these studies when he claims that "the short story has flourished in those countries where a vibrant oral culture is suddenly challenged by the onset of a sophisticated literary tradition".⁴ The short story is, therefore, "the natural result of a fusion between the ancient form of the folk-tale and the preoccupations of modern literature". In a period of cultural transition and revolutionary upheaval (for Ireland, the beginning of the twentieth century), the folktale was appealed to for knowledge and guidance and subsequently adapted to the genre of the short story. Yet, Kiberd argues, this period of cultural transition is now over. It is therefore high time for the Irish short story to reclaim that other strand of short story writing, the modernist tradition developed in Ireland by George Moore and James Joyce, "whose work bears no trace of the folklore of the rural Ireland in which they grew up".⁵ He therefore advises future short story writers to embrace the narrative innovation and stylistic refinement of these modernist writers and to stay clear of all myth and folklore.

Most contemporary writers have heeded this advice, with the result that Irish folklore and myth have been relegated to superficial and sentimental stories, which cater for tourists who want to believe in an idyllic Ireland still populated by fairies, bards and banshees. One writer who forms an exception to this rule is Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. Her short-story collections – *Blood and Water* (1988), *Eating Women is not Recommended* (1991) and *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* (1997) – are strongly influenced by the Irish story-telling tradition. Yet they transmit that influence in a resolutely postmodern voice. In this article I will consider the short story collection *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* (1997) to determine both *how* Ní Dhuibhne links the ancient folktale to the modern short story and *whether* she is able to successfully blend the two traditions of the Irish short story into a new postmodern genre.

II

The most explicit and important connection between the modern and the myth in *The Inland Ice* is provided by the story "The Search for the Lost Husband", which is told in parts in between the other thirteen tales. It is an adaptation of the Irish fairytale "The Story of the Little White Goat", which was recorded from the female storyteller Máire Ruiséal in 1936, and which is itself a version of the international "Beauty-and-the-beast" folktale. This fairytale is first made publicly available in the fourth volume of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, which contains a section on "International folktales" introduced by Ní Dhuibhne in her guise as scholar of mediaeval literature and folklore.⁶ She classifies "The Story of the Little White Goat" as a feminine fairytale. A sub genre of the folktale, fairytales or *Märchen* are complex tales of international provenance

with a durable form which hardly differs from one country to the next. Or as Ní Dhuibhne puts it, “Fairytale stories are stories of quest and adventure, peopled by beautiful girls and handsome boys, who encounter hags, ogres, dragons and giants, fly on eagles’ wings, climb grass mountains, eat from magical tablecloths, and finally marry beautiful rich partners and live happily ever after” (p. 1215). Máire Ruiséal’s folktale is, furthermore, a feminine fairytale because it tells the story from the perspective of the heroine.

Briefly put, “The Story of the Little White Goat” tells the tale of a girl who is courted by a little white goat and falls in love with him. She leaves her parents and goes to live with the white goat who turns into a young man at night. The girl becomes pregnant and the goat warns her that her child will be taken away and that when she cries, he will leave her. After her third boy is thus taken away, the girl cannot restrain her feelings any longer and sheds a tear. Following his threat, the white goat reprimands her and leaves. Yet, the girl immediately sets out in pursuit of him: “She went after him and he himself went, and he went through every bit of undergrowth, and through every briar, to make her turn back”. But the girl is not to be dissuaded, saying that it is stronger than herself, that she “can’t help it” (p. 1217). On three successive nights, the girl stays in a cottage where she receives a magical object. The goat then disappears under the earth and the girl follows him into his country, where she learns that the goat and his family are under the spell of the old witch. With the help of an old couple and her three magical objects, the girl persuades the witch to lift the spell. The girl is reunited with her lover and their three children. They marry and live happily ever after.

On the whole Ní Dhuibhne’s version of this fairytale, “The Search for the Lost Husband”, adheres quite well to the original. She follows the pattern of the folktale, relies heavily on repetition and fashions her own versions of fillers – “That’s how it was.”⁷ – and formulaic runs: “And the dew fell and night came down upon her, and the little white goat sought the shade of the dockleaf and the dockleaf eluded him and the red fox went into his own little den, small blame on the gentle fox” (p. 138). In short, while adapting language and dialogue to modern literary standards, Ní Dhuibhne carefully manages to retain the original flavour of the folktale. Still, three major changes stand out. To start with, Ní Dhuibhne’s title “The Search for the Lost Husband” promises an even greater focus on the plight of the heroine. It is *her* quest which is central. The phrase “the lost husband” also gives the story a more modern ring: while they are not normally transformed into goats, husbands still tend to get lost at times. Secondly, Ní Dhuibhne changes the ending significantly so that the whole receives an unexpected twist. When the spell has been lifted, the handsome young man, who had been the little white goat says, “And now ... we can get married, and live happily ever after” (261). But the meek girl suddenly turns into an assertive feminist and declares that she doesn’t want to anymore: “I am weary of ardent ways. Passion is so time consuming, and it makes me so unhappy” (261). Although her husband defends himself arguing that *he* couldn’t help it, that he was under a spell, she is not to be persuaded:

Goodbye to you now. I'm going home to my father and my mother, and I'm bringing my dear little children with me. And we'll have a bit of fun, playing together and laughing and I'll love them more than I ever loved you or anybody else. And maybe I will find another husband, who will be kind to me and my children, and who will look after all of us and not lead us round in circles. Because it's time for me to try another kind of love. I'm tired of all that fairytale stuff. (p. 262)

She goes home, the narrator tells us, marries a nice farmer and "they lived happily together for many years" (p. 262).

Thus the girl abruptly ends all fairytale conventions. She rejects Prince Charming and the possibility of everlasting happiness and pragmatically chooses a decent and trustworthy husband who can offer her "many years" of happiness instead. Her choice also implies quite literally a move from the world under the earth – the magical world of the goat and his family – back to the real world of her parents. In this way, Ní Dhuibhne draws apart the two worlds which the original fairytale pretends to unite. Even though reality and fantasy go together for a while, in the end they clash and diverge again.

This subversive ending has a distinct postmodern ring, which is further underlined by the metafictional comments of the narrator at the end of story:

That is my story. And if there is a lie in it, it was not I who made it up.⁹

All I got for my story was butter boots and paper hats. And a white dog came and ate the boots and tore the hats. But what matter? What matters but the good of the story? (p. 262)

Although disclaimers such as these are often found in postmodern narratives which want to draw attention to the artificial nature of the narrative, Ní Dhuibhne seems to have borrowed them, at least in part, from other folktales. Intrusions of the storyteller's "I" are in fact quite common in folktales, especially towards the end of the story. In "The Story of the Little White Goat", for instance, Máire Ruiséal tells us that she heard the story from her father – which should vouchsafe for its truth– and blesses his soul. She also comments on the action, remarking on the death of the old witch: "Yes. That was good and I left her behind me" (p. 1232). The ending of "The Search for the Lost Husband", on the other hand, resembles in part that of an "Ex Corde" folktale which Ní Dhuibhne records in *Béaloides: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society*.⁸ It reads: "He took the bailiff away with him if this story is true. But if there is a lie in it, it was not I who made it up." The curious lines about the dog and the butter boots refers perhaps to another folktale, the "Butter, Sir ..." anecdote, recorded by Ó Catháin in the same journal. The anecdote tells of a girl who goes to the market to sell butter, but – due to linguistic confusion – dogs eat the butter instead: "The butter prints fell out of her basket. And the Bhermone terriers started into the butter. They got the smell of it in a couple of minutes and the terriers didn't leave a bit of it that they didn't eat."¹⁰ Even if Ní Dhuibhne may not have actually borrowed

her ending from these particular folktales, it is clear that the closing lines of “The Search for the Lost Husband” are not only part of a postmodern meta-fictional practice, but also a remnant of the oral story-telling tradition. In short, already in the story which functions as the *leitmotiv* of *The Inland Ice*, Ní Dhuibhne tries to blend the ancient folktale tradition with postmodern themes and styles. This sets the tone for the whole collection. While the short stories are mostly set in contemporary Ireland and Europe, they are linked to the Irish folktale in both a formal and a thematic way.

III

In *The Field Day Anthology*, Ní Dhuibhne characterises folktales as “fictitious stories, formal in structure and making limited concession to realism” (p. 1215). Formal characteristics are the intrusion of the narrator’s “I” and the use of repetitions and formulaic runs. Time and setting remain unspecified and the characters have generic rather than particular names. All this contributes to the folktales’ curious mix of universality and artificiality. With the obvious exception of “The Search for the Lost Husband”, the stories of *Inland Ice* lack all of these traits. These stories are well defined in space and time; they deal with individual characters and events and their narrative situation is the modern one of focalisation. Still, through several narrative and thematic tricks, Ní Dhuibhne succeeds in creating an impression of universality and formality, which approaches that of the folktale.

First, although the concrete situation is different in each of the stories, many events, characters, and experiences are repeated throughout the collection as a whole. The female characters experience highly similar feelings, hopes and disappointments, they are forced to make the same choices and face the same consequences. In all but two short stories, moreover, the female protagonists are educated, middle-class, more or less middle-aged, contemporary Irish women. In this way, a fairly specific singular image of “The Woman” in *The Inland Ice* emerges, which is further underscored by the similarities between their respective husbands and lovers. All this gives the collection a strong sense of unity and the characters a near-mythic air. Several intertextual references to other folktales, Irish mythology, and Scandinavian sagas strengthen this impression.

Secondly, what *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* shares with the oral tradition of folktales, is a straightforward style. Sentences are usually short and simple. They lack elaborate rhetoric or an ornate use of metaphor and simile. Moreover, the feelings and thoughts of the characters are usually stated rather than explained which creates an impression of distance and coldness. The narrator does not show any overt sympathy for her characters. In this way, the short stories echo the exceedingly formal and simple style of the folktale, which focuses on objects and events but gives no account of the inner life of the characters involved.

Finally, even though the short stories do not feature explicit intrusions of the narrator as in “The Search for the Lost Husband”, the narrator does make her presence felt through the peculiar use of brackets. Nine out of the thirteen stories are told by a

third-person narrator who focalises through the main character. Within this decidedly modern narrative mode, the use of brackets is certainly odd. On a few occasions, the narrator's I appears quite explicitly, as in "Swiss Cheese" where it interrupts Cliona's thoughts: "Sitting in a minor jam on the Green, she stares at the numberplate of the car ahead of her. He simply didn't show up. (He sent a fax. I read it in the *New York Times*.)" (p. 147). However, most cases suggest the narrator's presence more obliquely, as in the following instance from "The Inland Ice": "Nobody ever helped. Frank didn't help her to make decisions. Never seemed to care about her in that deep way that mattered. (What she means is, he let her truckle along with her job as an executive in a public service office, a job which meant something to some people, but not to her.)" (p. 210). In all stories, however, these brackets interrupt the normal flow of the narrative and, just like the narrator's intrusions in the folktale, they draw the reader's attention to the story as story, as an artificial construct rather than an account of reality.

IV

If Ní Dhuibhne thus adapts style and structure of her collection to the formal characteristics of the folktale, the same holds true for the thematic dimension of *Inland Ice*. Again in *The Field Day Anthology*, Ní Dhuibhne writes: "The theme of all fairytales is the quest for love and marriage; they begin with the break-up of one family and end with the establishment of another. The greater part of the plot is concerned with how the protagonist successfully completes this transition from childhood to married adult life" (p. 1215). This is of course aptly illustrated by "The Search for the Lost Husband", but also the other short stories are dominated by the related themes of love, loss and marriage.

The first short story of the collection, "Gweedore Girl" follows the pattern of the original folktale most closely. One of the two stories set in the past, "Gweedore Girl" is the story of Bridget, a girl from Gweedore who becomes a maid in Derry. She is courted by the butcher boy, Elliot, and falls in love with him. He wants to get married and to that purpose she gives him her most precious possession: two pounds. Predictably, Elliot does not appear at the wedding and uses the money to marry another girl. Bridget sues him, changes jobs and is about to marry another, far more honest and dependable boy, Seamus. Just before the end of the story, Bridget records a dream which is a clear comment on her relationship with Elliot. Bridget is waiting for Elliot when a woman comes along and asks her to walk with her to the corner of the road. The woman, who is "not any woman I know but she was very tall and looked like someone I knew", is clearly Bridget's alter ego (p. 27). Bridget does not want to miss Elliot so she decides to "try to do both things" (p. 27). But in doing so she ultimately fails to do either. Elliot abandons her and the woman dissolves into paper: "She had turned into a piece of paper. She was a large cut-out doll, drawn in heavy black ink, with an old ugly face like a witch. She was folded in two on the ground and I opened her up and spread her out and read her" (p. 28). The image of woman dissolving into paper symbolises Bridget's loss of self in her relationship with Elliot.¹¹ She becomes the ugly witch he tells her she is, just as she becomes "Gweedore

Girl deceived and ruined” – the headline of a newspaper article about her “case”. Like the girl in “The Search for the Lost Husband”, however, Bridget takes life into her own hands again: she turns away from the self-destructive madness of her passion for Elliot and finds a more reliable husband. Yet, in “Gweedore Girl” this happy ending is somewhat qualified. Bridget continues to dream about Elliot and realises that her love for Seamus is of an altogether different kind: “It is amazing that I know that Seamus is good and kind and honest and will never mistreat me; also I will never love him” (p. 28).

The main theme of the original folktale – the passionate and self-sacrificing love of the girl for the goat – is also the main theme of *The Inland Ice*. “It is hard to resist men [...] who overwhelm you initially with the intensity of their need for you”, knows the narrator of “Love, Hate and Friendship”, “It is hard to resist them even if you know from experience that such men will, and must, cool off just as abruptly, and almost as emphatically, and there will be nothing you can do about it.” (p. 37). And this describes the experience of most female protagonists in *The Inland Ice*. Like Elliot in “Gweedore Girl”, the lovers are usually attractive, charming and gossipy, but also exacting and extremely selfish. They fancy themselves as god’s gift to women and loudly defend the feminist cause. The women are flattered and charmed by their lover’s ardent attention and fall hopelessly in love. Almost as soon as that happens however, the men back off and, just like in the original folktale, the women go on arduous quests and are prepared to extreme sacrifices in order to win them back. In “Swiss Cheese”, this passion is described as a kind of madness and compared to a “startling volcanic landscape, full of deep treacherous pits and gleaming glass mountains”, quite the opposite of “the calm, peaceful, loving, civilised life” which the protagonist lived before (p. 162).

As in Ni Dhuibhne’s rewriting of the folktale, indeed, most short stories stage an opposition between this self-destructive, passion and a more pragmatic, friendly kind of love. Thus they revisit the age-old conflict between the husband and the lover. Yet, unlike “The Search for the Lost Husband” and “Gweedore Girl” most of the short stories start from marriage, as if they want to determine what happens *after* the girl marries her “young farmer”, or *after* Bridget marries decent Seamus. Just like Seamus indeed, “The Husband” in *The Inland Ice* is typically masculine, stern, and reticent, but also kind, loving and dependable. Married love offers the female protagonists security, respect and friendship, which is valuable but boring, something they quite readily sacrifice when the white goat comes along. If in “The Search for the Lost Husband” and a few other stories, the moral of the story seemed to urge the protagonists to abandon self-annihilating passion and (re)turn to a more equal and balanced kind of relationship, this is contradicted by other stories. For also married love requires sacrifices – such as the choice between family and career – and most married protagonists feel in some ways disappointed with life. In “Estonia”, Emily used to feel that “if she were married, all the other problems of her life would fade into insignificance. Being married to Lars would compensate for its shortcomings. It would liberate her. Roads, green and juicy with promise, rainbow ended, would open before her.” But the truth is that “after they married it seemed that whatever choices she had had earlier began to vanish altogether” (186).

Since this sense of disappointment infuses all the stories of *The Inland Ice* – Giovanna Tallone calls it a “sense of loss” and notices how “characters are always in restless search of something”¹² – it may be worthwhile to further investigate its source. Whether they are married, adulterous, single or divorced, the protagonists all feel that life has not fulfilled its promises. Their bright ideals of passionate love and perfect happiness have somehow failed to materialise. To a greater or lesser extent, they all feel like Polly in “The Inland Ice”, when she complains: “I thought my life would be so different. I thought it would be, you know, wonderful! I always worked so hard and now it’s this. It’s just so hard for me to believe that this is my life” (p. 211). Very often these ideals are defined in terms of fairytales, folktales or romances, and predictably, real life never fully lives up to that ideal. In “Lili Marlene”, the protagonist marries a rich husband who makes her feel “like Cinderella”, but in the end she does not want to accept the role of “princess in the garden” he offers her (p. 98). In “How Lovely the Slopes Are”, the relationship of Bronwyn and her husband, Erik, is compared to that of Gunnar and Hallgerdur in the Icelandic “Njal’s Saga”. Yet, once again, real life turns out to be different from the folktale as friendship prevails over passion and vengeance. In “Lili Marlene”, to give a final example, the first-person narrator is disappointed that her lover does not bide by her, like Doctor Zhivago and ponders, “What I think is that life is like *Doctor Zhivago* up to a point – more like it than some would admit. People can have a great, passionate love. I have. Probably you have. But it doesn’t seem to survive. One way or another it gets done in, either because you stay together or you don’t” (p. 102).

In short, the feelings of loss and discontent pervading *The Inland Ice* are largely due to the fairytale illusions which the protagonists – even against their own better judgment – believe in. Their lives and dreams are shaped by romantic literature and fairytales, which has them wait for a prince who will rescue them and bring everlasting happiness. In all stories, however, reality fails to live up to this dream. As in “The Search for the Lost Husband”, reality and fantasy coincide “up to a point”, but ultimately they clash and diverge again. If there is a message to the book at all, it is that women should stop letting their life be determined by dreams and illusions, that they should stop waiting for Prince Charming and take life in their own hands.

A more general way of putting this – and one which is particularly apt in the context of *The Inland Ice* – is that women should stop letting their life be determined by other stories, or other people’s stories, and start writing their stories themselves. For the women in this collection are not only burdened by their own fictitious dreams of fairytale happiness, they are also oppressed by the stories other people fashion for them. In “Gweedore Girl”, we saw how Bridget’s *alter ego* dissolved into a papery witch: a clear image of the way her life was determined by how other people saw her. In “Swiss Cheese”, Paddy expects Cliona to fully live up to the image of the Virgin, which he stereotypically fastens on her. In many other stories, women’s lives are shaped by traditional expectations about the role of wife and mother, which has them choose between

career and family. The story “Bill’s New Wife”, for instance, makes these expectations painfully explicit when traditional gender roles are reversed but not abolished.

If the stories do point at a way out of this double predestination, it is in the ability of telling your own story, of writing your own life. In an interview with Giovanna Tallone, Ní Dhuibhne admits to a growing self-conscious concern with writing, storytelling, and literature in her work.¹³ In *Inland Ice*, self-expression helps people find mastery and satisfaction in their lives. Especially the stories told in the first-person foreground this empowering effect of storytelling quite literally. The story of “Gweedore Girl” for instance, can clearly be seen as Bridget’s alternative to both the newspaper article, which defines her as “deceived and ruined” and Elliot’s vision of her as an ugly witch. “Lili Marlene” is the narrator’s answer to the romantic love of romances and fairy tales. It presents her story as evidence of her conviction that “the end of love can make me happy” (p. 79). In “Estonia”, to give a final example, writing itself is proposed as a personal way-out of a life shaped by the demands and expectations of other people:

Whatever qualities she repressed as she worked during the day found an outlet in the words she writes at home, late at night. “Found an outlet” is not the right phrase. The poems erupted, like volcanic dreams, full of strange, exotic images, narratives whose relation to her days was as tenuous and slender as the link between the black and silver world of fairytales and the grey world of farm labourers, as the link between the haunting notes of southern spirituals and the bleak monotony of days on the plantation. (p. 187)

This quotation is interesting not just as evidence of Emily’s life-saving creativity, but also as testimony to the theme of the collection: the link between fairytales and the real world, which will briefly be revisited in the conclusion.

VI

We have seen how *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* establishes both a thematic and a stylistic connection between the fantastic folktale tradition and the more realistic genre of the short story. The effect of this parallel seems twofold. On the one hand, Ní Dhuibhne’s feminist rewriting of the traditional folktale and her retranslation of it in several other stories set in contemporary Ireland, has the effect of investing an otherwise ancient story with new life. The original fairytale gains new relevance as an interpretation of choices and problems women are still faced with. In *The Field Day Anthology*, Ní Dhuibhne argues that “the meaning of tales depends upon their immediate sociological context” and that once a tale loses all relevance to society, it will cease to exist (p. 1216). In this collection, Ní Dhuibhne tries to truly revive the folktale, not – as is mostly the case nowadays – by presenting it as a quaint account of long bygone ways, but by making it reflect and interpret the social values and attitudes of a postmodern society. On the other hand, Ní Dhuibhne’s use of the folktale in *The Inland Ice* also

throws new light on the short stories themselves. The connection to a folklore tradition in general and “The Search for the Lost Husband” in particular, makes the stories into more than just portraits of contemporary Irish women. Their stories gain a wider appeal, because they are linked not just to an Irish past, but to a far more universal human heritage.

Yet, if several formal and thematic elements of *The Inland Ice* thus draw attention to the fundamental similarity between the kinds of mythic experiences related in fairytales and contemporary experience, in the stories themselves this similarity is severely criticised and undermined. In many different ways indeed, Ní Dhuibhne stories draws attention to the differences between fantasy and reality, between folklore and modern life.¹⁴ If life is like a fairytale, it is so only “up to a point”. Moreover, in showing how the life of her protagonists is restricted by fairytale expectations, Ní Dhuibhne also argues that if life *cannot* be really lived like a fairytale, it *should* not be lived like one either. After all, folktales also contain certain preconceptions about life and love, which are felt to be restrictive in contemporary society. In short, *The Inland Ice and Other Stories* both installs a connection between contemporary reality and the ancient world of fantasy and fairytale and criticises or undermines this connection again. The result is not a merger of folktale and modern short story into a new genre, but rather a critical reflection on the link between “the black and silver world of fairytales” and the “grey world of the farm labourer”, a link which is “slender and tenuous” but which exists all the same (p. 187).

Notes

- 1 Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*, London: MacMillan, 1965, p. 18.
- 2 Patrick Rafroidi, “The Irish Short Story in English: The Birth of a New Tradition”, in *The Irish Short Story*, eds. Patrick Rafroidi and Terence Brown, Lille, 1979, p. 27; Terence Brown, “The Counter Revival”, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. III, ed. Seamus Deane, Derry: Faber, 1991, p. 92.
- 3 Particularly interesting in this respect is Walter T. Rix’s article, “Irish Oral Tradition and the Narrative Structure of the Anglo-Irish Short Story”. The article enumerates and describes specific thematic and narrative features which the Irish short story inherited from the oral story-telling tradition. Among the features Rix mentions are: “The narrator as performer”, “Identification of perspective and fictional main character”, “Frequent exploitation of ancient Irish mythology”, “System of oppositions”, “Consequent treatment of the clash between idea and reality”, “Pronounced tendency towards linear progression of time”. Other articles and studies which explore the relations between story-telling and short story in Ireland are: Benedict Kiely’s introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Short Stories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983; James F. Killroy (Ed.). *The Irish Short Story: A Critical History*, Boston: Twayne, 1984.
- 4 Declan Kiberd, “Story-Telling: The Gaelic Tradition”, in *The Irish Short Story*, eds. Patrick Rafroidi and Terence Brown, eds, Lille, 1979, p. 14.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 20. Patrick Rafroidi, like Kiberd, perceives two distinct strands in the Irish short story: the tradition initiated by Daniel Corkery, which relies heavily on folklore and traditions of rural Ireland, and the more urban, “more accomplished and less prolific” tradition originated by Moore and perfected by Joyce (Rafroidi, p. 36).

- 6 Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (ed.), “International Folktales”, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, Vol. IV, ed. Angela Bourke e.a., Cork: Cork UP, 2002. Henceforth references to this volume will be placed between brackets in the text.
- 7 Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, *The Inland Ice and Other Stories*, Belfast, Blackstaff, 1997, p. 139. Henceforth references to this collection will be placed between brackets in the text.
- 8 Ní Dhuibhne reproduces the whole story of the devil and the bailiff in the very first short story of *The Inland Ice*: “Gweedore Girl”.
- 9 Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, “Ex Corde AT 1186 in Irish Tradition”, *Béaloideas*, 48 (1980), p. 131
- 10 “The butter prints fell out of her basket. And the Bhermone terriers started into the butter. They got the smell of it in a couple of minutes and the terriers didn’t leave a bit of it that they didn’t eat”. Séamás Ó Catháin, “Butter Sir...” AT 1698 and 1699 – a typological sandwich”, *Béaloideas*, 45 (1977), p. 91.
- 11 This image of woman dissolving into paper also appears in another of Ní Dhuibhne’s short stories, “The Wife of Bath”. In that story, the narrator – a woman weighed down by domestic and motherly duties – tells of her meeting with Chaucer’s Alisoun, the wife of Bath. They talk of feminism and feminine duties and go for a swim in the baths. Alisoun dissolves in the water, since she is “just one man’s invention”, but the narrator herself is dissolving too, which suggests that her life has also largely been shaped and determined by other people’s expectations and representations. See Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, “The Wife of Bath” in *Testi, intertesti, contesti: Seminario su “The Wife of Bath” di Éilís Ní Dhuibhne*, eds. Gianfranca Balestra and Leslie-Anne Crowley, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000.
- 12 Giovanna Tallone, “Butter Boots and Paper Hats: The Fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne”, in *Testi, intertesti, contesti*, pp. 148-49.
- 13 Giovanna Tallone, “Q&A with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne”, in *Testi, intertesti, contesti*, p. 157.
- 14 It is interesting to note in this respect that the opposition between fantasy and reality is itself a familiar topic in folktales and in the “traditional” Irish short story. One of the features the short story inherited from the folktale is precisely, according to Walter Rix, “*the clash between idea and reality* [...] the most frequent antagonisms are ‘myth/fact’ and ‘the pretentious/the ridiculous’” (154).