

Ex-centric Human and Natural Identities in Edna O'Brien's *In the Forest*

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Abstract:

Drawing on ecocriticism and mathematics, this essay investigates ex-centric natural and human identities in Edna O'Brien's *In the Forest* (2002). The first part focuses on the ex-centricity of the three main characters – the forest, the murderer, and the female victim. They are depicted as being on the borderline of many disparaging identities. The second part deals with the two central episodes of the novel: a carnivalesque feast and the account of the murder taking place in the forest. The disorder caused by the suspension of reality in these two chapters not only displaces the three ex-centric identities from the borderline to the centre of the novel, but also maintains and reasserts their ex-centricity.

Keywords: carnivalesque, ecocriticism, ex-centricity, identity, Edna O'Brien

This essay proposes an ecocritical framework for reading issues of ex-centricity, in particular human and natural ex-centricities, in Edna O'Brien's novel *In the Forest* (2002). Ecocriticism fosters a rethinking of the hegemonic relationship between humanity and nature – the latter is considered to be inferior to the former. Additionally, it aims at finding a balance in the interaction of forces between human beings and their surrounding environment by means of an interdisciplinary cooperation of science and arts. Specifically, a mathematical theory will be used to support the literary analysis of the novel. In mathematics, eccentricity is a parameter that defines circularity in conic sections. The eccentricity of a circle – regarded as the perfect form – is zero, thus implying that there is no deviation from the centre. The value of this parameter progressively increases in ellipses, parabolae, and hyperbolae so that the distance of the points from the centre deviates from the circular path. Therefore, if the circle denotes perfection, which may in turn be associated with normative behaviours commonly established by culture, any eccentric human being or natural space departing from these rules necessitates, according to society, to

be brought back to the centre. Under these circumstances, divergent identities acquire a “hybridity” that renders them “subject[s] that inhabit the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (Bhabha 1994, 13). This essay argues that it is precisely through their hybridity and ex-centricity that human and natural protagonists become central in *In the Forest*. This centrality, however, is not attained by forcing them into conformity, but by displacing their marginality to the thematic and narrative centre of the novel. In fact, as if paraphrasing Irish poet Seamus Heaney’s words, “I am interested [...] in how writers from the margins [...] avoid becoming marginal, in the literary and cultural sense” (Heaney 2000, 26), O’Brien is interested in translating borderline characters to the centre of her novel. In other words, the marginal states of nature and human beings are rehabilitated within the mainstream culture even though they maintain their ex-centricity. To this end, O’Brien adopts suspension of reality and carnivalesque as fundamental literary devices.

In the Forest, much discussed by critics in terms of its violent tones and alleged infringement of the victims’ privacy¹, fictionalises the real murders of young artist Imelda Riney, her three-year-old son Liam, and Father Joe Walsh at the hands of Brendan O’Donnell in April 1994. The young murderer, apparently affected by schizophrenia, killed and left the three victims in Cregg Wood in the west of Ireland. The close connection between this crime and contemporary history is underlined by Shirley Peterson who has claimed that O’Brien’s novel represents the “product of [Ireland’s] geopolitical moment” (2009, 45). In fact, by means of a tragic and apprehensive tone, O’Brien shows scepticism towards the rapid economic improvements and cultural changes of the Celtic Tiger. Indeed, an increasing pursuit of wealth, which began in the sixties, pushed many Irish to leave the countryside and settle in big cities such as Dublin and Belfast. Consequently, they threw themselves into a completely new society and post-modern lifestyle without taking the time to fully understand what was happening – this process reached its utmost peak during the years of the Celtic Tiger between 1995 and 2008. Accordingly, Fintan O’Toole has remarked that Ireland passed from being an almost pre-modern to a post-modern country without experiencing the fundamental phase of industrialisation (2009, 100). As a result, Irish society modified its conception of nature and rural space into something which, seen from an urban perspective, acquired stoic and idyllic nuances. Nevertheless, those Irish who did not leave the countryside and still regarded it as the embodiment of hard work, experienced, even more than the others, the bewilderment and the paradox of hanging in the balance between pre-modern and post-modern society. Irish attitude towards nature shifted from pleasurable to disagreeable feelings, and *vice versa*. Hence, it may be assumed that, on the one hand, the socio-economic change fostered new cultural behaviours and attitudes; on the other hand, the old patriarchal and catholic Ireland – the outcome of, among other things, Eamon de Valera’s conservative policy – with all its gender mod-

els, stereotypes, and essentialist values still underlay the Irish social order. It is precisely within this context that the real triple murder of Imelda, her son, and Father Joe is correspondingly described in *In the Forest* as taking place in the interstitial suspension between two historical moments.

The novel opens in *medias res* by depicting villagers searching for the missing people in Cloosh Wood. The *incipit* introduces readers to a world of suspended reality, imagination, and dream. The first scene, in fact, is a dream-like episode in which a widow, who decides not to take part in the searches, dreams of a dangerous forest where “tall trees [are] no longer static but moving like giants, giants on their grotesque and shaggy roots” (O’Brien 2002, 1)². Nonetheless, once awake, the widow is not yet in the real world since she sees “Eily, the dead woman, with her long hair” (2). Henceforth, after the establishment of a dream-like reality, the narrative examines all the events prior to the murders starting with the life of Michen O’Kane, the fictional killer. Rejected by his family and abused by priests after his mother’s death, the boy develops a mental disorder and a violent personality that lead him to spend his childhood and adolescence in several prisons. Once back to his native village near the woods, the twenty-year-old Michen enjoys frightening everybody around him with his aggressive behaviours until Eily and her son Maddie, newly arrived in the neighbourhood, attract his attention. From Michen’s point of view, the mother and son have contrasting characteristics. On the one hand, they are a reminder of the lost relationship with his beloved mother; on the other, they are regarded as usurpers insofar as they live in his former house at the edge of the village. This traumatic combination appears to be what pushes Michen to kill the pair. Nonetheless, the novel implicitly conveys the idea that the reasons lying behind this horrible insane act are to be found not only in the murderer’s mental illness, but also in the generally dysfunctional Irish society – a society that, heavily traumatised by colonisation and rapid change, is unable to cope with a new lifestyle. As a matter of fact, the forest – which is conceived of as a real character – Michen, and Eily are firstly described, according to the mainstream culture, as marginal nature and human beings. This marginality is the result of a deviation from the conventional roles they are supposed to play, namely those of wild place, heroic man, and Virgin Mother. The three characters are, in fact, depicted at the margins of different allegedly good or bad identities with the aim of showing the disparaging villagers’ opinions as well as the protagonists’ unconventionality. Therefore, in order to illustrate how these three ex-centric identities are made centric by means of chaos and disorder during the carnival, this essay will mainly focus on the three hybrid characters – the forest, the murder, and the female victim – and on the two central chapters of the novel, “Fiesta” and “In the Forest”³.

The first important marginal identity presented in the *incipit* is the forest in which Eily, Maddie, and Father John are killed. At the edge of the village, Cloosh Wood is thus an ex-centric place. Its liminality resides not only in its

physical position in the Irish countryside, but also in the conventional conceptualisation of wild places in Western cultures. In fact, the ex-centricity of the wilderness is portrayed in the tension between, on the one hand, unfriendliness to and dark influences on human beings and, on the other, by its status as uncontaminated nature. This tension exemplifies how the particularly human conception of the wilderness has been stereotyped by culture down through the centuries. For instance, the Judeo-Christian tradition has played a major role in conveying a fixed idea of the wilderness since, as William Cronon has claimed, we invest wild places with our own “moral imperatives” (Cronon 1996, 39). The result is a well-established categorisation in good and bad nature, respectively represented by beautiful gardens and dangerous wilderness. The former is imbued with positive connotations due to its association with the Christian Eden; the latter, Satan’s kingdom, is permeated by sin and disorder and often described as a desert. Consequently, biblical images of the desert, the place in which Jesus suffered the Devil’s temptations for forty days, show strong connotations of bewilderment and terror. Under such circumstances, the wilderness comes to represent a wasteland where no morality reigns and where human beings can be turned into Satan’s sons and daughters. This implies that those people who are willing to live in wild places risk losing their humanity and becoming more animal-like or savage. In fact, in *In the Forest*, a priest advises Michen, who is willing to live in the woods, to avoid such a wild place otherwise he will be transformed into an evil creature. This advice makes Michen think of the prophet Jeremiah’s words: “*A curse on the man who puts his trust in man / [...] He is like dry scrub in the wastelands / He settles in the parched places of the wilderness, / A salt land, uninhabited*” (O’Brien 2002, 43; italics in the original). Therefore, as the quotation suggests, Michen firstly assimilates the essentialist conception of the wilderness and then applies it to the woods.

Nevertheless, this stereotypical concept begins to change during the nineteenth century under the drive of English Romantic poetry and American Transcendentalism with writers like H.D. Thoreau. In their hands, the wilderness ceases to be only dangerous and also becomes a genuine and innocent place in contrast to the fabricated nature of human civilisation. Accordingly, it becomes an astonishingly beautiful landscape where humanity can restore its original closeness to nature; it is an exemplary space inspiring human beings to build a new and genuine society. As Thoreau famously wrote, “In wildness is the preservation of the world” (quoted in Cronon 1996, 69); it is a place where one can experience beauty and pleasurable feelings as well as terrifying sensations. As a matter of fact, the very first description of Cloosh Wood portrays the forest as a dark and deadly place: “spindly, freakish, [...] the trapped wind gives off the rustle of a distant sea [...] the light becoming darker and darker into the chamber of non-light” (O’Brien 2002, 1). Nonetheless, at the same time, because of the violent crime the woods have just witnessed “during those frantic, suspended and sorrowing days”, they also

conform to the stereotype of beautiful nature being contaminated and even destroyed by human beings: "It was then the wood lost its old name and its old innocence" (1).

With regard to Michen's hybrid identities, they are rendered through the various names that highlight the discrepancy between his views and those of the other characters. In the collective perspective, he is either "the Kinderschreck" (the bogeyman), because of his violent and twisted behaviours, or nameless – he does not even deserve a name – thus becoming "the Boy", the "Child", "K, short for O'Kane" (3). Moreover, the villagers scorn Michen by calling him "dog" (8), "[r]at" (98), and "animal" (229). The insulting purpose of these names exemplifies a specific cultural stereotype which establishes that the human species is superior to all the other living creatures on the planet. Therefore, Michen, who is considered to be at the edge of humanity and animality, becomes an inferior human being. Conversely, the protagonist, before committing the murders, prefers to call himself "Caolite, the name of the forest" (19). With the aim of contrasting the villagers' perspective, Michen's assertion of his identity is highlighted by the use of a proper noun, Caolite, since, as it has been remarked, he is deprived of a name. In addition, in order to define his identity more clearly, he puts it into written words in his school notebook, "*I am a true son of the forest*" (6; italics in the original). He seals his closeness to the woods through both verbal and written words in order to show the others the identity with which he wishes to be recognised. Nonetheless, the affirmation of such a clear and defined identity does not prevent Michen from assuming other borderline personalities. He also claims, for example, an evil individuality by referring to himself as "the devil's favourite son" (65); if he is the forest's son, then he is implying that the forest is an evil place. Michen also states his multiple identities when he denies to have killed some kittens in one of his foster houses – "it was someone else" (20). He is actually declaring his own dissociation into several persons and further pushing himself to the margins. In particular, through his syllogistic statement, "God hates me, Father hates me, I am hated" (4), Michen realises his liminality. If "God" and "Father" metonymically refer to the Church and the family, two of the most powerful institutions in Ireland, then he means that both the Church, personified by all the priests who were supposed to take care of him, and his family have abandoned him. Hence, the conclusion of the syllogism, "I am hated", generalises the feeling of hatred: he is marginalised by everybody else in the world.

Michen's liminality is repeatedly asserted by references to his suspended life between reality and imagination. His sister Aileen, maybe the only person who cares about him, highlights his borderline position by saying that "This world is not his world" (45). As a result, although he may not be in the actual world mentally, he inhabits it physically; he is in two worlds simultaneously. This liminality is perceived not only by the other characters, but also by Michen himself. He hears and talks to voices coming either from the real world or from the underworld. In particular, he is addressed by the woods

that congratulate him, “Welcome home son... you did us proud... didn’t let the bastards [*gardai*] get to you” (65), and also by his dead mother who promises to come back and rescue him (4). Therefore, Michen turns out to be inhuman, and thus ex-centric, due to his physical closeness to nature, his talking to unreal voices, and his moving from one world to another. In fact, if humanity, with all its alleged qualities that firmly distinguish and separate it from nature, represents the central rule, Michen results in being far from the centre; in other words, the villagers see him as a bad and deviate young man. Indeed, by virtue of the stereotype which regards human beings as intellectually superior to any other natural creature, the villagers cannot accept within their community – or within their “circle” – somebody who talks to nature; consequently, they keep Michen at the margins.

Eily, the third marginal character analysed in this essay, is a beautiful young woman who, attracted by the primeval and mystical nature of East Clare, decides to move with her little son near Cloosh Wood. She is a divorced and independent single mother who, consequently, does not fit the iconic image of the Virgin Mary – the highest model of womanhood and motherhood to which all the Irish women were once supposed to conform. Perfectly aware of her unconventionality, the female protagonist expects to hear different types of rumours about her – “I wonder what they make of me” (25). The others, for example, regard her as a “dipso” (85) because she wants to go to pubs, or as almost inhuman, like Michen, insofar as “her feet are not on the ground” (107); in short, since she deviates from the cultural norm, Eily does not belong to the human world. The woman recognises her liminality and plays with her different identities as witnessed in the episode in which she admits to having “an army of spirits protecting [her]” (28) or when she compares the suffering of her solitude to the hungry cry of cormorants in the far sea (63). However, before the carnival chapter, Michen’s point of view on Eily’s marginal identities prevails over the villagers. While spying on her at Maddie’s school, Michen thinks that she cannot be a mother – a conventional mother – since she not only looks “too young” but she is also “smoking and laughing” (71). These words conventionally imply that a woman who smokes and laughs is neither ready to be a mother nor good enough to raise children. Nevertheless, once Michen finds out that she does have a child, he finally recognises her motherhood and begins to develop an emotional interest in her. His feelings for her are conflicting because, although he likes Eily, at the same time, he demonises her with the aim of underlining her monstrous and seductive aspects: she is a “madwoman” or a Medusa whose hair is “like snakes” (79). Mythology, which is a great source of images for Eily’s identities, confers on her a kind of cosmic allure. Since Michen thinks of her as “ocean, deity, water, fire” (79), the woman acquires clearly inhuman nuances that push her far from centric human nature. Nonetheless, although assuming multiple identities, Eily also attempts to state her motherhood: “Eily’s a mummy” (100). This direct speech

in the third person may suggest that, even though she is a mother by virtue of having given birth to a child, she distances herself from all the mainstream implications conveyed by the term “mummy”. She remains on the borderline between conventional and unconventional womanhood.

“Fiesta”, an almost central chapter which narrates of a local folkloric carnival, represents a crucial stage in the displacing of the aforementioned ex-centric identities from their marginal positions to the centre of the novel. This chapter will be examined in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. According to Bakhtin, the comic discourse of the carnivalesque has developed through four historical stages during which it has been defined by its relationship with official culture. Except for the first (pre-class society) and the third stage (the Renaissance with François Rabelais’s work), during the Middle Ages and the twentieth century – respectively the second and the fourth stage – the carnivalesque has been downgraded to the lowest levels of the cultural hierarchy and relegated to the realm of unofficial culture. In fact, there has always been a contrast between the seriousness of the mainstream culture, which proposes its univocal truths, and the comic aspects of the carnivalesque that portray, instead, an ambivalent and alternative world view. In essence, Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque as the combination of folkloric feasts with the comic discourse of the Middle Ages, specifically “Ritual spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace”, “Comic verbal compositions”, and “Various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons” (1984, 5). In a broad sense, all the local feasts that enter the world of the carnivalesque bear “the common traits of popular merriment” (218). Accordingly, common laughter and corporeal images are conceived of as the main characteristics of the comic discourse. The former offers people the possibility to momentarily break with the strictures of official life; the latter proposes a grotesque and ambivalent body – the simultaneous representation of birth and death through the depiction of its organic functions – in order to celebrate “the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” (11). Both the laughter and the grotesque body hold a “regenerating power” (39) that, however, is lost in favour of gloomier and darker nuances during Romanticism. The carnival episode in Edna O’Brien’s novel is characterised by merry and dark features simultaneously.

An earlier introduction to the carnivalesque is to be found in a preceding chapter of *In the Forest* in which “Elmer the elephant”, a soft toy in his “harlequin suit”, nearly causes Maddie to be involved in a car accident. Elmer is a sinister presence “who doesn’t miss a trick, making sure that they don’t go without him. Elmer is no fool. His droopy ears are all agog” (O’Brien 2002, 101). The linkage between the elephant and Harlequin, the comic servant in the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte* who is conceived of as an emissary of the devil, suggests a comparison to Michen who is repeatedly described as devilish. As a result, Elmer’s sardonic attitude after the accident – “and there in the middle

of the road is Elmer, unscathed, strangely comic and plucky in his harlequin outfit" (104) – may be implying that he is not giving up his main purpose, but that he will try again to kill the child. In contrast to the frightening impact of this episode, the proper carnivalesque chapter, "Fiesta", appears less sinister. In addition, its nearness to the centre of the book, together with its representation of a marginal reality, makes this chapter a crucial ex-centric as well as centric scene. In fact, in line with Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque as the construction of "a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (1984, 6), the pagan feast in *In the Forest* focuses on an in-between reality suspended among different worlds and different perspectives.

Set above the mountain near the woods, the feast takes place in the perfect natural environment to express "old lust, debauchery and division between men and women" (O'Brien 2002, 108). Therefore, this cheerful moment is marked by a chance to give vent to repressed feelings and lust while the usual social order is temporarily suspended; the crowd's "pagan impulses [are] brought to life in this heady carnival" (112). Consequently, the pagan feast is characterised by some of the main features of the carnivalesque; namely, collective gaiety, ambivalence, chaos, liminal identities, and a movement backwards and forwards among the different perspectives. There is a "Ruling Queen – Queen Euvul" who, with her "gaudy girls", seems to symbolise the regeneration of the old world by virtue of her name that is a reminder of female ova. As seventeenth-century Irish poet Eogan O'Rahilly wrote in "The Reverie" (O'Beirne Ranelagh 2012, 88), Queen Euvul is a woman with "a throng of magical girls" waiting for their King to come "and make [them] happy and reign in a fortunate land". Since the Irish poets of the seventeenth century were closely linked to their Gaelic ancestors who celebrated the feminine qualities of the land, this reference to Queen Euvul may be read as an allegory of the oppressed, personified Ireland waiting for somebody to rescue her. Therefore, if the Queen in "Fiesta" is Euvul, and consequently Ireland, it may be assumed that she is a representation of the forest; in other words, she embodies that part of the Irish soil that is given paramount importance in the novel. If, on the one hand, Euvul suggests life, on the other, she is also "draped with dead squirrels, leaves and the accoutrements of the forest" (O'Brien 2002, 108). Through the use of ambivalence, the association of death and life makes this wild place an encompassing space in which opposite elements coexist.

Among the Ruling Queen's girls there is "Winnie in harlequin suit" – a woman interpreting a male mask of the *Commedia dell'Arte* implies that there is a gender role inversion, thus an undermining of social rules – and "Eily the Princess" (108-109). It is at this point that the comic atmosphere is abruptly interrupted by a parallel, though different, perspective. Michen, in fact, seems to be gloomier and more sinister than the general merry crowd. He is "at one with the dark, squatting outside" (109) and focuses on the lascivious symbols qualifying Eily's mask, the "purple dress and purple gloves" (109). Afterwards, the narrative voice goes back to the villagers who are intent on

using an abusive language. Harry, the Master of Ceremonies, puts Eily at the centre of the scene and asks the audience to look at “her tearful eyes red and hot, her passions burning as in a pot” (109). Lusting for a man, Eily the Princess turns her attention onto her own body:

*Couldn't some man love me as well
Aren't I plump and sound as a bell
Lips for kissing and teeth for smiling
Blossomy skin and forehead shining
Look at my waist. My legs are long
Limber as willows and light and strong
There's bottom and belly that claim attention
And the best concealed that I needn't mention.* (110; italics in the original)

As the carnivalesque prescribes, the public showing of Eily's wanton body aims at abolishing the boundary between public and private and, as a consequence, at creating a universal body that is in constant relation with the external world. In fact, although she finally seems to hide some of her body parts, “the best concealed”, everybody knows what she is referring to; hence, it is indeed public and not well-hidden. She continues reciting: “*Every night when I went to bed [...] Burnt bits of my frock, my nails, my hair [...] And night and day on the proper occasions I Invoked Old Nick and all his legions*” (110-111; italics in the original). Eily's closeness to the devil, a relationship that is implicit in the first part of the novel since her unconventionality makes her evil in society's eyes, is here overtly declared on the occasion of a liberating feast. It follows a passage in which the collective perspective, fictional reality, and Michen's point of view are juxtaposed in order to create a universal whole which is made of interstitial spaces and marginal identities. Michen seems to “lose contact with the earth” while Harry is questioning Eily; in fact, with his “Are you a witch, Eileen Ryan?” (111), Harry is not addressing Eily the Princess of the feast, but Eily Ryan the young artist. Therefore, the question asked in the three different worlds finds a unifying answer in the princess' “Maybe” (111). Hence, by neither denying nor affirming her affiliation to dark magic, Eily remains on the borderline. Furthermore, the overlap between Michen's and the villagers' views continues with the centralisation of Eily's body:

She drew her stole down and Harry gasped in mock terror and marched her around for everyone to see and be horrified by the devil's hoof marks on her breast bone, skewered in a vivid indigo colour. To the crowd it was all fun, make-believe, but to O'Kane it was real, she had stepped out of her own world into his, into his transmogrified dream of her, all-mothering, all-sinning. She-devil. (111)

Accordingly, reality comes to be defined as the simultaneous presence of ex-centric and centric perspectives. Nonetheless, within this organic whole, each

perspective maintains its peculiarities. The difference between Michen's and the community's world is distinctly highlighted. While Eily's association to the devil is "all fun" for the crowd, it is "real" to Michen who conceives of her as the expression of apparently contrasting identities: mother, sinner, and devil. Therefore, unlike the usual social order, this specific carnivalesque disorder is ex-centric as well as centric. It is ex-centric because it involves numerous levels of reality, including marginal realities; it is centric because it finally represents "life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play" (Bakhtin 1984, 7). Indeed, this play attains its climax when the last outburst of freedom and carnivalesque merriment dissolves into disorder and ambivalence: "The nun came on stage, riding a donkey, whacking it with her rosary beads and when it lifted its tail, misbehaved and brayed, the crowd laughed until they cried, tears and laughter all one" (O'Brien 2002, 112). In this last quotation, the conventional order is undermined by the nun giving vent to her passions on a donkey and by the ambivalent co-presence of laughs and tears that characterise the concluding scene of the feast as universal. And, when celebrations are over, the carnival spirit still affects the villagers who plunge in the lake with Eily in "the orgies of the deep" (113).

So what, then, is the role of the carnivalesque in *In the Forest*? In order to answer this question, a list of the main purposes of the carnival according to Bakhtin may be helpful. Its functions are:

[T]o consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (Bakhtin 1984, 34)

As analysed, the carnivalesque in O'Brien's work celebrates creativity and combines opposite and ambivalent elements, but it does not achieve a complete liberation from mainstream culture and gender stereotypes. In fact, despite the pervasive cheerfulness and the disruption of the conventional social order, Eily the Princess always remains a lascivious, seductive, and devilish woman – as she is regarded in the fictional reality. Therefore, in line with the general relativity of the whole novel, it may be assumed that "Fiesta" works as yet another suspended chapter; a realistic narrative moving between the carnivalesque stylistic requirements and the author's intentions. O'Brien is neither completely following the features of the carnivalesque nor entirely undermining them thus proposing an ex-centric and suspended world which aims at suggesting the relativity of human perspectives on people, nature, and events.

After the gay tones of the carnival, the narrative shifts to the darker and more frightening "In the Forest". This is exactly the central part of the book in which Michen abducts Eily and Maddie, brings them into the woods, and finally kills them. In this chapter, the forest, Michen, and Eily do not

lose their marginal identities but, through the narrative, are brought to the core of the novel insofar as, from this point onwards, they will be the central focus in the villagers' views. When Michen enters Eily's house, he is depicted with distinctly evil features, "bubbles of foam on his lips and his eyes rolling" (O'Brien 2002, 115), and tells the woman about his frequent conversations with the devil, the "Big tall man with horns" (128). Despite his narrative centrality, Michen maintains his twisted and mad personality when simulating a phone call about his childhood: "Reported on sick parade... metal in Vomitus. Released from medical centre. Reunited with family at front gates. Energy level terrific. Chlorophyll feed. C and D not necessary. Proceeding north west as per coda. Over. Over" (126). The fragmented prose of this quotation signals the fragmentation of Michen's inner self that comes to be defined as a hybrid of different, sometimes opposite, identities. Indeed, in contrast to this satanic nuance, Michen also calls himself "Iggy, short for Ignatius" (115). The association to the founder of the Jesuits brings him closer to Jesus, and consequently, to God. As a result, he is not only relegated to the margins of the society but also omnipresent, "here, there, everywhere" (115). Therefore, in his pervasiveness, he remains ex-centric.

Inside his forest, Michen is able to feel the power he has been denied his whole life. As a consequence, he now expresses his opinion on the external world and makes the woods centric by means of his own persona. If he is Jesus, God's son, then his house becomes "God's country" (119) – God is central in Catholic Ireland – and not the borderline place of the *incipit*. Moreover, eager to exert his power, Michen invests Eily with mythological as well as disparaging identities. On the one hand, she becomes Thetis, a sea goddess and Achilles' mother, "*an ocean deity. Reluctant to marry a mortal Peleus she changed her form to a wave, then a fish, then a burning flame*" (117; italics in the original); thus, she is imbued with cosmic importance while yet maintaining her capacity to change "form" and remain liminal. On the other hand, Michen calls her "Goatgirl" (121) with the aim of showing that he has the power, that he is superior to her. Therefore, rather than suggesting an intersection between the woman and the goat, Michen is qualifying Eily as a sacrificial victim. Consequently, she becomes centric by virtue of her sacrifice for traumatised Ireland; she is "the instrument of something outside of herself, iconic, picked from a thousand faces for wanton ritual" (140). In fact, if Michen is the victim of a society that has neglected and abused him during his childhood, he is now taking revenge on a member of this society. Nevertheless, although exerting his power and thinking of Eily as the embodiment of multiple identities, Michen is forced to recognise her motherhood since, in this very same chapter, she affirms exactly what the others believe she is not: a mother – "I'm a mother first and foremost" (132). Therefore, even though she does not conform to the iconic mother, she claims her right to be a mother under her own rules. She finally becomes an alternative model of motherhood.

With reference to the centralisation of the forest's identity, it is interesting to notice that while it pervades the chapter – it is mentioned in the title and represents the main setting of the narrative – it is often described as an empty place; it is qualified by “an emptiness that is ghastly” (119). The “ghastly” clarification, as in the aforementioned quotation about Eily's destiny as a sacrificial victim, foreshadows the deaths of the mother and her son – as ghosts, they will hunt Michen during his imprisonment. Kieran Keohane has pointed out that the empty houses in the Irish countryside in the nineties represent “cultural trauma and tragedy; the destruction of the collective household of society” (2012, 69). Therefore, by metonymically referring to Ireland in general, the forest comes to represent the emptiness, the difficulties, and the mutability of post-modern Ireland. Furthermore, it acquires the conventional characteristics of a desolate land through the many occurrences of the word “wasteland” (O'Brien 20002, 120, 121, 136) which cannot but make the reader recall T.S. Eliot's poem. As a result, both nature and society are ruined by human beings. Hence, not only the Irish are suffering because of the rapid socio-economic changes of the late twentieth century, but nature too, as evidenced in its woodland, is showing emotional and physical wounds. It is precisely by looking at these wounds, a “wasteland of tree stumps and charred branches”, that Eily realises “that something drastic ha[s] commenced” (136). She is implying that there is not a positive perspective on the future; this is a tragedy and she is doomed to epitomise a collective sacrifice. From an ecocritical point of view, it may be argued that such a description of the woods as wasteland and wilderness conforms to the conventional connotations of wild places, but O'Brien's novel is actually conveying the idea according to which contemporary Ireland is injured both culturally and physically in its own soil. The wilderness stereotypes are only deployed to show how human beings can damage nature:

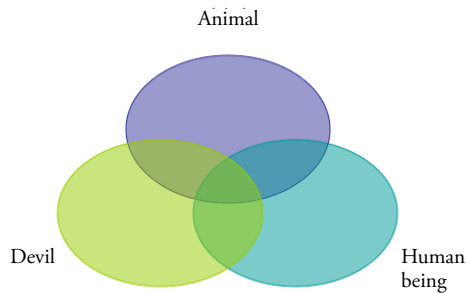
How engulfing the darkness, how useless their tracks in the rust brown carnage of old dead leaves. Pines and spruces all together, their tall solid trunks like an army going on and on, in unending sequence, furrows of muddy brown water and no birds and no sound other than that of a wind, unceasing, like the sound of a distant sea. But it is not sea, it is Cloosh Wood and they are being marched through it. The ground is soggy under foot, with here and there shelving rock sheathed in slippery moss. Not even an empty cigarette carton or a trodden plastic bottle, nothing: emptiness, him, them, insects. (122)

The sense of inevitability is as “engulfing” as the darkness. Although it may seem that this is an inimical place for human beings, as the Judeo-Christian tradition declares, the woods themselves are caught within this “darkness” which is an external and superior force and not one of its features. Furthermore, the adjectives “unending” and “unceasing” may convey scepticism towards a possible happy ending either for the victims or for the Irish in general. In fact, there is also a sense of powerlessness which does not allow Eily and her child to change their future in a place, a country, where “emptiness” reigns.

In conclusion, through this development from ex-centricity to centrality, Edna O'Brien transforms her specific characters into universal protagonists in Irish history. The individual traumas of Michen, Eily, and the forest are brought into a collective dimension by means of interstitial and hybrid identities. The rendering of Cloosh Wood as a universal place is expressed in the last pages of the central chapter:

All earth, all air, all forest is filled with Maddie's cries [...] their desperate cries as one, going up to the trees and down to the wisps of dew that have outlived the morning, rising and expiring, dying and perpetuated in that catacomb of green, up there at the edge of the world, on the point of sacrifice. (140-141)

Therefore, by making universal not only the forest but also Eily's and Maddie's tragic deaths, "the edge of the world" becomes the *omphalos* of a collective trauma and sacrifice. In addition, by individually analysing the ex-centric identities of the forest, Michen, and Eily as if they were sets in mathematics, the common element of the sets turns out to be the character itself/himself/herself. For instance, Michen is depicted as an animal, a devil, and a human being, as shown in the following figure:



The interstitial space among these three identities, which is also the central part of the sets, is occupied by Michen himself. To put it another way, all the three ex-centric identities are simultaneously rendered central by virtue of their very marginality.

Notes

¹ Fintan O'Toole addresses O'Brien's violation of the boundary between public and private life in his article "A Fiction Too Far" (2002).

² Subsequent references are cited in brackets.

³In the Forest is made of fifty-two chapters. “Fiesta” is the twenty-fourth, while the twenty-fifth chapter, the central and the longest in the whole novel, is “In the Forest”.

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