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**Aspects of Liminality in
Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing***

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Table of Contents

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|---|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| The Concept of Liminality | 5 |
| Kristeva's Notion of the <i>Chora</i> and the Connection to Dance | 7 |
| Liminal Attributes Traced in Orla and Pauline | 9 |
| Liminal Differences Depicted in Jacqueline, Aisling and Sandra | 14 |
| The Positive Aspects of Liminality and the <i>Chora</i> | 18 |
| Bibliography | 22 |

Introduction

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (Yeats 92)

In the lines above from Yeats's poem "Among School Children," Yeats seems to ask how one can tell the difference between the dancer and the dance but at the same time he wonders whether it is possible to know the dancer by watching the dance. The paradox in Yeats's question might hold the answer that one can not know the dancer without looking at the dancer's dancing, but at the same time one can not fully reveal the dancer without attending to the person behind it. As a former dance student, I believe that there are other paradoxes which can be found in the dance. The dancer steps outside the ordinary structures of life and enters into the realm of dance, but at the same time the very essence of dance is anti-structural and consists of movements that exist in a realm of timelessness that are beyond and between fixed arrangements. To return to Yeats's poem I quote from the last stanza where he writes that "Labour is blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure soul" (Yeats 92) and here I think that "soul" should be put in the context of "living soul." In this poem Yeats deals with the "quest for unity" and by these words he asks the educational system and the authorities to permit every child to become an autonomous self that pleases his/her soul and not only the soul of the authority.

The journey that every child takes from childhood to adulthood and the struggle that has to be accomplished in order to become a united self, is the theme of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's novel *The Dancers Dancing* (1999), where she depicts the experiences of a group of teenagers

from Dublin and Derry during a summer in the Gaeltacht. The essence of the dance is also relevant to the novel and is seen in the first chapter where Ní Dhuibhne writes that the truth and the story are “in between, in between, in between” (3). I wish to refer Ní Dhuibhne’s narrative construction and the theme of the novel in the context of the anthropologist Victor Turner’s framework of liminality. Turner connects the words “betwixt and between” with the term liminality (*The Ritual Process* 95), which is an anti-structural condition outside everyday life and also outside structures and positions assigned by law and conventions. In *The Dancers Dancing* Éilís Ní Dhuibhne intimates a connection between liminality and the narrative construction of the main characters in the novel, and the aim of this essay is to explore how the concept of liminality can be applied to the novel, to the main character Orla and the other protagonists Pauline, Jacqueline, Aisling and Sandra. Another aim is to see how the protagonists’ liminal experiences are reflected and influenced by their participation in the dance. This essay will suggest that the liminal space offers an area of many possibilities. It functions as a free zone where the protagonists can freely explore their personal issues that trouble them, or the difficulties of their own society. Once back in their ordinary social situation they can use their acquired knowledge to alter it.

In contrast, the significance of the girls’ rite of passage has been overlooked by William Pratt in his review of the novel. Even though he observes Orla’s rite of passage, he sees it “as merely a brief episode in her life” (596), instead of, as I argue, an important stage that influences her adult life. More valid are Daniela Shoushi’s arguments in her essay “Orla’s Quest for Knowledge and Self Realisation in *The Dancers Dancing*.” Shoushi rightly suggests that the girls’ journey can be pictured as an initiation process that initiates them into aspects of Irish life; at the same time as it is a depiction of Orla’s search for identity. But whereas Shoushi approaches the novel from a psychoanalytic perspective, I will use an anthropological approach to explore the main characters in the novel and I will also make a connection to Julia

Kristeva's notion of the *chora* which she links to the "unlimited and unbounded" processes of the dance (Kristeva 452).

The Concept of Liminality

As a theoretical method Victor Turner's concept of liminality will be applied to the novel and moreover Kristeva's apprehension of the *chora* will be dealt with. In the next chapter I will explore the meaning of the *chora*, but I will begin by turning first to Turner's idea of liminality. The term is derived from the Latin word *limen* that signifies threshold or margin. Turner's adoption of the term is an extended concept that he has borrowed from Van Gennep's formulation of rites of passage (*The Ritual Process* 94-130). Rites of passage or rites of transition occur when an individual moves from one stage of life to another or from one social situation to another. Van Gennep argues that every rite of passage displays three stages: separation, transition and incorporation (Van Gennep 1-14). Turner focuses on the transition stage or the liminal stage, which signifies a threshold between more or less stable stages of social structures. As maintained by Turner, "being in a tunnel" would also be an accurate portrayal of this phase, since it describes its "mysterious darkness" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 232). Although he bases his studies on tribal rituals, many of which were made among the Ndembu people of Zambia, his ideas can be applied to more secularized societies and activities. Thus in *The Dancers Dancing* the summer adventures in the northwest of Ireland that the main character Orla and the girls, Pauline, Jacqueline, Aisling and Sandra experience can be understood as a depiction of an initiation rite that is linked to Turner's concept of liminal spaces that are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between" (*The Ritual Process* 95).

In the novel the first stage in the rite of passage is seen when the five girls together with other teenagers, part from their parents in Dublin and Derry and start their journey to an

Irish College in Tubber in the Gaeltacht. The Gaeltacht is situated in the west of Ireland, a remote part of Ireland that is associated with traditional Irish life and a place where Irish is still spoken. The second stage, or the liminal stage, is accomplished during the month spent in the Gaeltacht where they step outside everyday life and, to use Turner's own words, the initiands are "set aside from the main arenas of social life in a seclusion lodge or camp" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 232). In Tubber, the girls pass through a realm that has few of the elements of their past or future position. Finally, in the third phase when the teenagers return home, the rite of passage is consummated and the initiands are reincorporated in the ordinary social network. Ní Dhuibhne thus comprises the past, the present and the future when she describes the significance of the stages.

Communitas is the Latin term that Turner prefers to use when he describes the society that emerges in the liminal period. He favours this expression; since it gives a more exact illustration, than if he had made use of the expression community. A community, which indicates an "area of common living," (*The Ritual Process* 96) is also correlated with the ordinary hierarchal social constitution, which is marked by separation, classification and where obligation is predominant. *Communitas*, on the other hand, presents a "moment in and out of time," (96) and is an anti-structural society that is associated with spontaneity and freedom. Nevertheless, although Turner applies the term anti-structural, it is appropriate to point out that *communitas* is not a completely unstructured society. Instead it is relevant to draw attention to the fact that it is a loosely arranged society of equal individuals who homogenously submit to an authority (*The Ritual Process* 94-130). This equal submission enables the classification of the ordinary arrangement to be deconstructed. In the novel, Ní Dhuibhne touches upon the classification, when "suitcases of all shapes and sizes and ages and social classes," (Ní Dhuibhne 19) are lifted out from the bus on the teenagers' arrival at Tubber. The girls are given board and room locally and the separation is clearly displayed

when Orla and Aisling from Dublin, who share the house with Pauline and Jacqueline from Derry, realise that Jacqueline lives in a council house. Orla and Aisling are startled since “[they] do not mix with people who live in council houses, as a rule, and would never have believed that such people could look like Jacqueline” (62-3). However, the comradeship develops and the separation gradually diminishes and turns into “a kind of equality [...] that isn’t possible in Dublin” (136). This is due to the fact that they now have been placed outside the ordinary political and social system with its conflicts concerning religion and nationality and also due to the teenagers’ equal status and submission to the teachers and to Headmaster Joe’s “absolute authority” (21). Then again, his authority will be reduced, since the girls in a liminal domain will challenge his authority. The liminal entity can be illustrated as a phase of reflection and when the passengers return to their ordinary society; they may have obtained knowledge that can confront the norms of it. (Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* 105-6). Many literature theories are based upon the notion of the individual as a political or linguistic construct and what I find interesting here is that Turner actually offers a means for the individual to challenge the ruling discourse. This generating process is also evident in Julia Kristeva’s notion of the *chora*.

Kristeva’s Notion of the *Chora* and the Connection to Dance

Julia Kristeva distinguishes between two aspects of language, the semiotic and the symbolic, both of which interact and are always present in language. Structure, authority and repression govern the symbolic language, while the semiotic is in close relation to movements, gestures, sounds and rhythms that are experienced by the pre-Oedipal child in a symbiotic relationship with the mother. The action of the semiotic instinctual drives “toward, in, and through language” (Kristeva 452) generates a process that is “a passage to the outer *boundaries* of the subject and society” (Kristeva 453) and forms a *chora*, a Greek word that means enclosed

space or womb (Moi 161). This is a term that Kristeva has borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus* where he uses it to describe a space that is "unstable, uncertain, ever changing and becoming" (Kristeva 460). Kristeva refines the idea and claims that it is not a sign or a position, instead it indicates "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation" (Kristeva 453). It is full of movement, but it is also regulated "not according to a *law* [...] but through an *ordering*" (Kristeva 454). The semiotic process is only intelligible through the symbolic realm of signification since it first has to enter the code of linguistic and social communication, before it can defy and alter it. This process or revolutionary practice she sees in modern literary texts, for example, in texts by Joyce. She argues that his text deconstructs the realm of signification since the text moves through it, is aware of the syntax, for example, but then rejects the limits and changes it.

According to Kristeva nonverbal art, such as dance and music, are tantamount to modern texts when speaking of the revolutionary practice of texts, a practice that "is the radical transformation of social structures" (Kristeva 459). In Ní Dhuibhne's novel the dance which is experienced is a *céilí* dance. Brennan explains in *The Story of Irish Dance* that *céilí* is a Gaelic word meaning "an evening visit, a friendly call" (30). It is a group or figure dance which was invented at the beginning of the twentieth century as a part of the Irish nationalist movement in its aim to promote Irish culture (29-43). I believe that it is interesting to note the difference between the *céilí* and the *sean-nós* dancing which generally is associated with the west of Ireland. Whereas the emphasis in the informal *sean-nós* style (or old style dancing) is on individuality (135-149), the institutionalised *céilí* dance is an educational form that is based upon figures and groups and thus taught at Irish summer schools:

All the formalities that have been dispensed with in the dance halls of Ireland are firmly enacted, even enforced, here – either because Headmaster Joe, who

is aged about fifty-five, insists on clinging to the traditions of his youth, or because the male scholars are supposed to be educated to be courteous, gentlemanly, gallant, according to the high standards of the Gaels of yore. (Ní Dhuibhne 47)

Although the emphasis in the *céilí* dance is on figures, it is important for the dancer to understand “the need to *dance* a set as opposed to merely knowing the figures” (Brennan 162). Firstly, the dancer learns the structure and secondly, the structure is resolved and then the *chora* is attained. Consequently the Irish dance in Ní Dhuibhne’s *The Dancers Dancing* can be associated with the *chora* and its revolutionary practice. By means of the dance the girls reach the *chora* and through this semiotic process that they experience outside “the shelter of the family” (Kristeva 459) some of the girls are enabled to question and evaluate received cultural values of their family and the established society. “Awkward as elephants” (Ní Dhuibhne 48) the participants of the first *céilí* in the novel, “walk their way through the patterns, which to the uninitiated seem unbelievably complicated” (48). Slowly “the patterns begin to take a loose shape” (48) and Orla, Pauline and the other girls begin, through the patterns of the dance, “[in] and out, round and round and round, in and out” (48), to explore the liminal entity.

Liminal Attributes Traced in Orla and Pauline

Absence of property, silence, asexuality, suspension of rights and obligations to relatives and no status are some liminal attributes that Turner ascribes this space. He also compares the liminal space to being in the womb, to invisibility, to sacredness and the wilderness (*The Ritual Process* 94-130). In Ní Dhuibhne’s narrative construction of Orla these representations are presented and she embodies most of the attributes that belong to an initiation rite. For

instance the description of Orla as an initiand that possesses nothing is clearly indicated when she gets her periods and she neither has the knowledge what to do, nor has the money: “Orla has nothing. No equipment, no money” (Ní Dhuibhne 203). The condition of asexuality appears in the *céili* dance where Orla establishes a partnership with a boy from Belfast: “He and Orla do not exchange a single word, apart from the formulaic greeting and response, during all the time they dance together. And there is nothing sexual or sentimental in their relationship” (49).

An initiand’s characteristics of lower-most status are reflected in Orla and her position of invisibility is perceived when she wonders why “Nobody hears her. Nobody ever hears her” (224). Already from the beginning of the novel the reader gets to know that Orla, according to herself, has a lot of disadvantages. Her background, her weight and her clothes are causes of anxiety, and even though Ní Dhuibhne makes the reader aware of the fact that Orla as a narrator is not completely reliable, “since judgement in this area [weight] can be so subjective” (10), a picture is given of Orla as a person who has not much self-esteem and who regards her and her family as inferior: “The inferiority of Orla’s family to the families of Orla’s friends is immense” (30). To hide her shame she “never tells anything about her family because everything about them is too shameful” (129). Thus she neither reveals that her mother is a landlady, nor mentions that her father is a bricklayer and comes from the poor, rural Tubber. She also keeps on postponing her visit to Aunt Annie who lives in Tubber.

Gradually, the authoritative system is being subverted and during the intervals in the thoroughly mapped out schedule, Orla starts to explore forbidden areas. One of them is a burn. The connection with the womb emerges in Orla’s preoccupation with the burn in Tubber, where she finds a “glaucous cavern” (71) that is “dangerous at the same time as it is more magically seductive than any place she has ever been” (71). The danger of the cavern Orla directs to mystical powers, which are attributes of liminality according to Turner (*The*

Ritual Process 94-130). Therefore, her worries are not bound to the real danger of the water; instead her worries are attached to “fairies” (Ní Dhuibhne 72). Moreover, liminality implies solitude (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 52) and one of Orla’s remarks about the cavern is that it is “completely enclosed, completely private” (Ní Dhuibhne 71) which is a desirable state since “privacy is what Orla craves” (68). Ní Dhuibhne links the significance of the cavern as a symbol of a liminal space, or the *chora* and the fruitful results of it, with Orla’s future. When Orla eats wild berries by the stream she finds the flavour of the berries:

Sweet, tangy, cool, fresh, wild, tinged with an exotic flavour [...] a flavour that is a confirmation, for her, of the jewel-studded world that awaits exploration, that in all its richness is waiting for her to step into, to experience, sometime soon, when she grows up. That is what the berries seem to be: a taste of a wonderful future, not a residue of a wild world that is past, or passing. (72)

When speaking of self-esteem, rank and status Orla’s situation differs from Pauline’s.

In Ní Dhuibhne’s characterization of Pauline, the liminal attributes that signify loss of rank and property are not portrayed. Among the girls Pauline “has quickly emerged as the most important girl in the house” (40). If Orla seeks privacy Pauline does not. Although “[she is] used to being alone” (107) she does not approve of loneliness, since she puts it in relation to darkness:

The oak tree seems blacker and shiftier now that she’s alone. The moon flits more dramatically in and out of the clouds. She pulls the curtains: darkness has always filled her with anxiety. (102)

It is not Pauline's first parting from her parents since they have previously left her "to go on a holiday together, without her" (103). Consequently, she has attained a "grown-up way" (40) and is sexually more mature than the other girls. Pauline does not care "a fig for authority" (51) which is a resulting effect of her growing independence. Hence, at the *céilí*, when she dances with the teachers she "remains stiff" (50) to make them feel awkward and to show that she does not accept their authority. The teachers get the message and associate her with wilderness: "[Pauline] is the sort of girl who needs watching. Anarchy personified. She is the sort of girl who could lead anyone astray" (52). She may represent wilderness which is an attribute ascribed by Turner to show liminality. But at the same time Pauline is not easy to place in a fixed position and this circumstance connects her to Kristeva's notion of the *chora* and to intertextuality. The male teacher, Killer Jack, expresses his disapproval of Pauline and he thinks that:

She is different from most other girls. He, and everyone, can intuitively sense this, although they cannot put their finger on what precisely this difference is. It is not that she is rich and beautiful. It is that there is some part of Pauline that is never available, to anyone. Maybe it is secreted inside her and she guards it carefully. Or maybe she is simply a bit odd. Wired to the moon, that sort of thing. Maybe there is a bit of her floating in outer space, out of her reach altogether, which means that when you look at her or talk to her, she is not all there, not all there for you anyway and maybe not all there for herself. (166)

In relation to this, we can consider Toril Moi who in "Marginality and Subversion" explains Kristeva's refusal to use the term femininity. Kristeva emphasises the semiotic pre-Oedipal stage and thus she also weakens the traditional division of gender, since in this phase there is

no division of masculinity or femininity. Kristeva does not approve of a theory of language that is based upon any absolute form of identity, instead she focuses on the concept of intertextuality which means that the language is a “signifying process located in and between speaking subjects” (Moi 154). Kristeva claims that all meaning is contextual. Hence, the meaning of a text will not be fixed or closed, which will give a boundless study of language. This statement will give a study of language in specific situations and does not allow such generalisations that there is an essence of femininity or masculinity, since there will not be a fixed meaning of these words. This refusal to be positioned is fruitful since the woman consequently can resist being marginalized to the patriarchal order, and this prevents her being assigned to represent darkness as a Whore, or alternatively to represent pureness as a Virgin (150-73). The importance for women not to be read or conquered by an authoritative, phallogocentric order is also addressed by Gwen Raaberg. Although Raaberg gives the example of Sarah in Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, I think that the rebellious Pauline, like Sarah, stands for a female that avoids being apprehended or understood from one dominating perspective and especially since Ní Dhuibhne uses a male teacher to give utterance to Pauline’s insubordination. Pauline escapes being looked upon by a single perspective and this gives her freedom to discover herself.

Pauline’s struggle to become a unified self concerns her parents’ situation. It is as though she has been forced into a liminal space before she actually has been ready for it. Pauline’s mother Maureen is a Catholic and she comes from the lower social-class, whereas Pauline’s father Douglas is a Protestant and belongs to the upper class. The problem is that Maureen’s in-laws do not wish to have any contact with her and only wish to meet Pauline and her father. Instead of dealing with the problem the parents pretend that it does not exist:

And it is Pauline alone who dances the dangerous dance across the minefield that divides her mother's and her father's territory. The domestic borderland [...] is Pauline's special inheritance. All the adults in her life avoid stepping on it, and only one or two even acknowledge its existence. (103)

As a result, Pauline has been forced to deal with her parents' trouble, due to their different social and religious backgrounds. All the same, in the Gaeltacht, Pauline gets the opportunity to confront and to acknowledge the dilemma.

The events in the novel are narrated from Orla's and Pauline's point of view and sometimes the author intrudes into her own narrative to comment on the story and to give her own opinion. For instance she criticises the authoritative governmental system that teaches children and especially girls "not to think or ask questions, to turn their backs on their own souls" (145). Jacqueline, Aisling and Sandra on the other hand never tell the story from their point of view and instead they appear through the narrative voice of Orla and Pauline.

Liminal Differences Depicted in Jacqueline, Aisling and Sandra

Through the voice of Pauline, Ní Dhuibhne portrays Jacqueline as a character that is affected by the political situation in the Northern Ireland. The events of the novel take place in 1972 and "bombs, shootings, hunger strikes" (98) are actions that happen on Jacqueline's road: "For Pauline, as for [Orla and Aisling], all this stuff happens only on the news. But for Jacqueline the news is on her road, because she lives in a place on the news, the Bogside" (99). Jacqueline's family is Catholic and belongs to the lower social class and her father is in prison in Long Kesh, but she is not ashamed of these things, instead "she is proud of them" (64). During her stay she receives bad news from her family regarding the fact that they have been stopped by "the Brits" (62) when they were going to move into a Housing Executive

house. But what bothers Jacqueline, at least consciously, is that she can not have decent food, which in her opinion is chips, at the family in Tubber. Eventually when she finds a slug in her salad, she decides to leave the summer school, in order to go home to her own family in Derry. As for Jacqueline, I wish to refer to Donnan's and Wilson's anthropological study *Borders* where they present liminality as an interstitial condition that is a "suitable metaphor for life at international borders" (Donnan 66). In the chapter "The Liminal Irish Border" they draw the example of the border of Northern Ireland as a marginal and ambiguous border, where "ethnic ties and difference depend not on ritual, although that plays an important part too, but on the politics of national identity and religion" (73). I believe that Jacqueline, who is constantly in a marginal position due to the Northern Ireland conflict, is too involved in social and political structures so that she can not step outside these structures. Consequently, Jacqueline's complain about the food is only the conscious explanation to her departure from Tubber, but the true reason is the political controversy that affects her life.

Jacqueline's marginality and Pauline's maturity come out in the dance and their attendance can be likened to fertility dances. At the *céilí* when "the music starts their eyes light up, their bodies sway slightly" (Ní Dhuibhne 50) and Orla, Aisling and Sandra "sit in their home-made cotton dresses and ankle socks, watching Jacqueline and Pauline metamorphose, girls becoming mermaids" (50). When it comes to dancing, however, Jacqueline is the better partner, at least according to her teachers, since "she is compliant, gives herself to the dance" (50). Alongside with Pauline, Jacqueline is the best-looking girl and "their corner of the room glows with charm, sexuality, fashion" (50), but while Pauline is of high rank, Jacqueline "is dismissed by Orla, by everyone, as a person who does not make the grade" (51). Pauline understands Jacqueline and is concerned about her, but she wishes that she would have been able to say to Jacqueline that "she is a nitwit and really should just eat the food and stay in the Gaeltacht because if she doesn't she'll be classified as a loser"

(170). Turner argues that an initiand not always returns to the ordinary structure at a higher rank, since “ritual degradation occurs as well as elevation” (*Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* 232) and here Jacqueline personifies the ritual degradation.

Looking at Orla, her opinions are deeply influenced by her mother Elisabeth and thus Orla’s opinions about her friends are coloured by her mother’s. Aisling and Sandra characterise the “Other” that Orla and her mother wish/wish not to be. Aisling is Orla’s best friend, a girl whom she looks upon with great admiration since she holds her to have no disadvantages. In Orla’s eyes “[Aisling] has the best of everything, and is perfect in every way” (Ní Dhuibhne 10), an opinion which is not only reflected in Orla’s mother, but also enforced since Elisabeth “is drawn to Aisling and Aisling’s mother even more than Orla is” (111-12). On the other hand Orla is disturbed by the fact that “her mother wants her almost to be Aisling” (112). Shoushi describes how Aisling’s family resembles a soap opera family that could “be seen as a geometrical figure, a square like a TV-screen” (10) and it is this quality of perfection that seems to attract Orla and her mother. Important to point out here is how Ní Dhuibhne connects a statement about Aisling, where she says that “Aisling is an open book” (Ní Dhuibhne 133), with another one, where she tells that when the girls have grown up, “their future is their past, an open book, a closed chapter” (5). These statements in context give the understanding that Aisling will remain a flat character, like a soap opera character, since her past will be her future. Also of relevance is her parents’ visit during her stay in Tubber, which is interference in her liminal condition. Aisling’s square-shaped personality and her parents’ interference prevent her to enter the liminal space and as a consequence she can not get access to the positive aspects of it that would enable her personality to grow.

Contrary to Aisling, Sandra is the “Other” that Orla wishes not to be or/and Orla’s mother wishes her not to be. David Parkin says in “Ritual as Spatial Direction and Bodily Division” that “it is the denial of the other that, by default, promotes the self” (24) and here

Sandra can be an embodiment of that other. According to Orla and her mother Elisabeth, Sandra has many flaws and except for her accent of local English dialect there are others as well: “she lives in a flat, not a corporation flat but any flat is bad enough. Respectable people live in houses. ‘Never go in there!’ Elisabeth warns” (Ní Dhuibhne 14). In the novel Sandra’s otherness is also pointed out when Sandra discovers that she has been accommodated with other girls than Orla and Aisling.

However, in the dance the otherness is not stressed by Ní Dhuibhne, on the contrary the resemblance between Orla, Aisling and Sandra is striking, which gives rise to the interpretation that the otherness is a construct. Aisling establishes a relationship of convenience with a boy, similar to Orla’s partnership and moreover, Sandra and Orla seem to share the same experiences at the *céilí*: “Orla swings her way through the dances with Alasdair, with Damien Caulfield, with Seamas Brennan. Sandra dances with Seamas Brennan, Damien Caulfield, and Alasdair” (161). At the same time as the ritual act, as Parker claims, functions as a division that promotes the self, the ritual act according to Gerd Baumann can be used to overcome differences. In “Ritual Implicates ‘Others’” he describes how the ritual act can be used to deliver a message across a cultural division and hence reformulate “the cleavage between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Baumann 98), which, as a matter of fact, will be the result of the liminal rite of passage that Orla experiences. During Orla’s stay in the Gaeltacht, she evaluates her opinions about Sandra and consequently, Orla overcomes her prejudice against Sandra. If Sandra, according to Orla, used to be formulated as “them,” Orla reformulates her opinions about Sandra, who becomes “us.” This is an illustration of, what Turner would call, the sacred knowledge that is derived from a liminal state, or else, to use Kristeva’s notion, an example of the boundless practice of the *chora*.

The Positive Aspects of Liminality and the Chora

Ní Dhuibhne's characterization of Orla and Pauline relate them to the *chora* and they are the ones that gain, what Turner claims to be the "sacred knowledge" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 259) that is derived from a liminal state. The author's depiction of their characters as liminal advantageous, I believe could be referred to the term marginals, which Turner makes use of when he relates to individuals who are "simultaneously members [...] of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another" (233). In this group he includes persons of mixed ethnic origin, migrants from country to city, and persons that are upwardly or downwardly mobile.

Referring to Orla and Pauline, I would like to use Colin Graham's book *Deconstructing Ireland*, although I do not directly treat post colonialism and colonialism in my essay. In the chapter "Liminal Spaces: Postcolonialism and Post-nationalism" he deals with Ireland's culture and the relationship between Ireland and Britain, where he stresses the liminal discourse as a tool to understand the Irish culture:

Postcolonialism's movement into the 'liminal spaces' of colonial discourse needs to be superimposed over the model which sees colonial structures purely in terms of division. It is this newly developed ability to identify transcultural movements and interactions which makes postcolonial theory a necessary intervention in understanding Irish culture. (93)

Neither Orla, nor Pauline, can be categorized to one single group and they have knowledge of different cultural phenomenon. Transcultural movements and interactions are evident in their lives and these circumstances enable them to understand themselves and their culture.

Looking at Pauline, her marginal position is due to her parents and accordingly she has religious ties to both the Catholic and Protestant religion and to different social classes as well. Consequently Pauline is used to adapting herself to prevailing circumstances, and for instance Orla notices that “[Pauline] has a gift for tones and moods. She can adjust her wavelength to anybody’s, if it suits her. She can sense a tone, or set one to match what is around her” (Ní Dhuibhne 41). This adaptation is not easily carried through, especially when she has to solve it all by her self. In the beginning she is afraid of being alone and afraid of darkness, but during her stay in the Gaeltacht she gets “in love with the night, with the sea, with the risk” (197). She also notices that familiar buildings such as the schoolhouse and the church are “all strange and magic in the depth of night, all clothed in the robes of their own otherness” (213). It is as though she realises that she does not have to be afraid of the darkness and the otherness within herself. Instead she can sense the magic that comes from it. She gets available to herself, not only available to her parents.

Continuing with Orla, we learn that her father is a migrant from the country of the rural Ireland to the city of Dublin and her mother is a British woman, who strives to move Orla upwardly in the social hierarchy. As a result Orla is placed in between these structures in a marginal position. In the novel this position is visible: “Orla of the double allegiances, Orla of the city and the country, Orla who belongs in both places and belongs in neither” (29). Out of her state of powerlessness which Orla experiences in the Gaeltacht, appears a sacred knowledge that she can use to find her own identity and to find her own voice. This is indicated when she “takes off her tangerine shoes” (112), of which the material is “not leather, yet not plastic” (11) and instead she puts on plain sandals that are “Ideal for Irish college!” (11). Orla evaluates and alters the received cultural values from her mother Elizabeth concerning Sandra, and as a result she realises “what a good person [Sandra] is, and feels the loss. Elisabeth flits through her mind when she looks at Sandra [...] What was wrong with

Sandra really?’” (136). The fact that Orla’s father Tom is a bricklayer also causes Orla shame, since according to her mother he is an “absolute nobody” (76). In the end, however, she reflects on the matter that Aisling’s father Ciaran, whom she respects, resembles her own father: “[Ciaran] has such modulated, educated tones and he looks so squeaky clean, but this view sounds just like her father’s” (176).

As shown, transcultural movements and interactions enable Orla to understand herself and her Irish inheritance. Orla is in the process of acknowledging her Irish inheritance from her father, but still it is relevant to point out that *Ní Dhuibhne* connects Orla with the future of Ireland and not with the myth of Western Ireland that embraces “the myth of the last” and fails to recognise the destructive “myth of the IRA” (69). Consequently the berries that Orla finds by the burn have “a taste of a wonderful future, not a residue of a wild world that is past, or passing” (72). Thus, Orla’s ambiguity concerning her identity and the accuracy of her own thoughts changes into security:

Still, there is a surprising store of words in Orla’s head that have never before emerged into the light of day, into the sound of day. Her own ears. She has hardly ever heard her own voice, listened to her own voice, and it gets louder and louder, clearer and clearer, as she gets used to it. (201)

Above, the depiction of Orla’s epiphany, when she starts to express her feelings in words and she realises that she has a voice and an opinion of her own.

Finally, at the last *céilí* the liminal stage in a rite of passage is coming to an end. The teenagers have prepared and made efforts to look better than usually and they “have left their everyday personalities behind them, and risen to a new occasion” (233). The dancers “trained now like the Kirov Ballet, take up their positions. The fiddler lifts his bow and the room is

filled with ripe, merry music. In and out the dancers move, in and out and round about” (235). The patterns of the dance symbolise the movements of the *chora*, and as the “patterns form and unravel” (235) the dancer experiences the dance and the life: “It’s the dancers dancing” (236).

The connection between liminality and the narrative construction of the main characters in the novel *The Dancers Dancing* by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne is evident. The summer in the Gaeltacht is a metaphor for the liminal phase in a rite of passage that is linked to Turner’s concept of liminality. Ní Dhuibhne’s differently constructed characters enlighten different aspects of liminality and through the *céili* dance the experiences of Orla, Pauline, Aisling, Sandra and Jacqueline are exposed. Kristeva’s notion of the *chora*, which can be associated to dance, is also relevant when describing the unbounded and unlimited process that radically can reform social structures. Sandra is the “other” that Orla formulates as “them” but during the liminal period, Sandra becomes “us.” In the rendering of Jacqueline and Aisling, Ní Dhuibhne intimates characters that are not connected to the *chora* and neither are fruitful from a liminal perspective. In the case of Jacqueline, she is too politically involved to be able to step outside the ordinary structure, whereas Aisling is too fixed in social structures and therefore is immovable. Orla and Pauline who simultaneously belong to different groups concerning religion, social classes and nationality, can during a liminal state, step outside their ordinary structure and the norms of it. Through transcultural movements and interactions they are able to explore themselves and their society and when they re-enter their ordinary life they have a deeper understanding of themselves and of the Irish culture. From this position they are able to liberate themselves from the yoke of society and can become their true selves.

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