Mastronardo, C. (2024). Down With the Tide: How Wilderness and Islandness Are Represented in Two Novels From Ireland and Iceland. *Folk, Knowledge, Place*, *1*(2), 116–136. https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.127046

RESEARCH ARTICLES

# Down With the Tide: How Wilderness and Islandness Are Represented in Two Novels From Ireland and Iceland

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Keywords: islandness, liminal spaces, Irish literature, island studies, Icelandic literature, Ireland, Iceland

https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.127046

Folk, Knowledge, Place

Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2024

Islands have often been approached by their most evident feature, their *islandness,* their liminality. This brought scholars to investigate islands via dichotomies and contrasts (mainlands versus islands, centres versus peripheries). However, how important is wilderness when approaching the literary island? Do wilderness and islandness influence each other in the eyes of those living the island? To answer these questions, this article explores the relationship between wilderness and islandness from the point of view of two scholars exiled on islands: Ireland in the novel *Skerrett* by Liam O'Flaherty and Iceland in the novel *From the Mouth of the Whale* by Sjón. What emerges is a intricated tapestry of common motifs and themes in the islands' representation. From these novels, it is also evident how the feature of islandness is used to reinforce a sense of isolation and to instil a feeling of abandonment in the reader.

## Introduction

Laura Feldt wrote that people go to the wilderness to meet themselves, their demons and their gods (Feldt, 2012, 2015). For a very long time, wilderness has been considered a space untouched by civilisation, a space that exists only to help humankind understand its own cultural dimension (Oelschlaeger, 1991, 2005). A significant aspect of wilderness is its call and appeal to experience a powerful and new mental emotion. To look for this emotion, and discover new uncharted territories of the mind and of the map, humankind has turned its gaze at islands. Islands have often been researched by their most evident feature: their islandness. The reality of an island is the reality of an entity constantly changing, a reality that encompasses land and water, and at the same time is neither of those entirely. Each island is unique, and this uniqueness is rendered through a feature, *islandness*, that makes the island three-fold: geographically unique, for its proximity to all elements, and for its isolation from the land; ecologically unique, for it can create an environment strikingly different from the mainland; and, last, culturally unique, as the challenges posed by isolation and limited resources force specific interactions between humans and the wilderness around them.

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While, according to Godfrey Baldacchino, some scholars postulate that islandness triggers certain social features (Baldacchino, 2004), others are more cautious, and propose islandness as the feature that makes a comparative perspective of islands really possible. Emilio Biagini and Brian S. Hoyle (1998) advance the idea that insularity and development are interconnected, and highlight how the isolation of islands makes them the perfect case studies to analyse methodological issues in the context of development theory. Furthermore, Huei-min Tsai and Eric Clark (2003), while recognising the fact that island studies is not a homogenous field of research, propose the compelling necessity for more nature-society approaches to islands. In fact, echoing Grant McCall (1996), they advocate for the study of islands on their own terms, to remind continental dwellers these realities are "not theirs; that an island world view is not theirs; and that an island integrity belongs to Islanders" (Tsai & Clark, 2003, p. 189).

Answering the call to "not only continue deepening" island studies' "internal theoretical understandings but also reach out to other fields and regions that have received limited attention within island studies" (Grydehøj, 2017, p. 3), this article offers an analysis of two under-studied novels from Ireland and Iceland, considering the role of islandness and wilderness in both.

The protagonists of *Skerrett* and *From the Mouth of the Whale* will meet their fate in the wilderness on the islands they are exiled to, far from the coasts of Ireland and Iceland. These two novels were chosen for their cultural importance, their representation of island settings and island communities, and their narrative: the experience on those shores will be life-changing for the two protagonists. *Skerrett* and *From the Mouth of the Whale* are also two valid examples to further investigate islandness in literature. However, parameters needed to be met to provide a novel approach to the analysis: 1) the author must be an islander; 2A) the novel selected must be set on an island; OR 2B) the novel selected could be partially set on an island, but the protagonist must be an islander. It is important that the author is an islander to better highlight a unique perspective on islandness and island-scapes.

Skerrett and Jónas, the main characters who happen to be scholars, experience terrible life events that eventually shape their perspectives on life, religion and even revolution. Across O'Flaherty's and Sjón's novels, islandness appears shaped by three major features: (a) the liminality of the island, (b) the islands' wilderness, and (c) the islands' history. Islandness ultimately influences the two main characters to adapt, and go down with the tide. Skerrett is a good illustration of how the fight for independence from the mainland actually represents a metaphor for Irish struggle against the British colonial power. In a similar case, Jónas uses the loneliness of his island to come to terms with a world in transition. The article explains how these literary representations would not be possible without the structure of the island to uphold them. Thus, this article approaches the challenge of an analysis of two novels taking into account the research on islandness. This represents an original contribution to the fields of island studies and English

studies as islandness so far has mostly been approached from the geographical perspective, the political perspective, and within social sciences (Baldacchino, 2007; Biagini & Hoyle, 1998; Peckham, 2003). Integrating island studies into a comparative perspective of the novels, this article unravels the relationship between wilderness and islandness, and how this is represented in two exemplary work of fiction by Liam O'Flaherty and Sjón. It will answer the questions: how important is wilderness when approaching the literary island? Do wilderness and islandness influence each other in the eyes of those living *on* the island? In doing so, this comparative analysis will contribute to the growing body of island studies research, and serve as a building block into the ever evolving discourse of the versatility of islandness as a concept to further explore in literary fiction. I will now briefly introduce the two authors and provide an overview of the novels, before explaining the methodology.

Liam O'Flaherty (1896 - 1984) carefully crafted realist novels often set on his native west coast of Ireland. He dedicated particular attention to the period of the Irish War of Independence and Civil War (*The Informer*, 1925), and to the Irish Famine of the 1840s (*Famine*, 1937). According to O'Brien (1973), O'Flaherty "considers the Famine a watershed between and old and a new Irish mentality" (p. 38). Born in 1896 on the biggest of the Aran Islands, Inis Mór, O'Flaherty was inspired by the close-knit island community (Gonzalez, 1997). Across his body of literary work, which includes both short fiction and novels, even when O'Flaherty is not writing about an island, there is a sense in which isolation and stark natural landscapes leave an indelible mark on the author's imagination. In this instance, Phillips (2005) describes the 'grotesque' as a feature of O'Flaherty's style, caught between resistance and idealism, unable to reconcile a certain idealism with the reality of the world around him, hence seeing it as grotesque. Indeed, Gonzalez argues that O'Flaherty's whole career seems to be a path to disillusionment, highlighting in particular how, having started training for priesthood, O'Flaherty joined the Communist party in the 1920s. Because of this, he suggests, O'Flaherty's work provides a valuable point of view into the complex social, and political realities of Ireland in the post-Revolutionary period, when idealism was turning to disillusionment, as an author never afraid to explore themes of poverty, oppression, and the struggle for independence that characterises Irish history. Perhaps the best-known work in this regard is O'Flaherty's critically acclaimed novel, *The Informer* (1925), which delves into the moral dilemma faced by a protagonist entangled in the Irish Republican movement, while he learns to balance conflicting loyalties with what will ultimately require personal sacrifice. At the same time, almost all commentators on O'Flaherty, from Patrick Sheeran (1976) to John Cronin (2003) point to O'Flaherty's island origins, and in particular his origins in an Irish-speaking island, as being central to the way in which his subsequent work – even such determinedly urban novels as *The Informer* – were shaped by what we can now identify as an island consciousness.

O'Flaherty's novel *Skerrett*, selected for this article's analysis, serves as a compelling account of community behaviour on the Aran Islands. Not studied as much as *The Informer*, *Skerrett* was published in 1932 and follows the protagonist, David Skerrett on his new life on the Aran Islands (which appear in the novel as Nara, Aran spelled backwards). Skerrett is forced to move to the island after an accident that happened while he worked as a schoolmaster elsewhere in Ireland. As a punishment, he is sent to the island to replace the previous schoolmaster who has gone 'mad'. Skerrett lands on Nara with rooted ideas of how society and education are supposed to be and be taught. In his character, the dualism of the conflict between the ideas of a mainland-centre and the subordinate island are alive. From the outset, then, *Skerrett* shows us something of the relativity of islandness. Nara (or Aran) is the island of the novel, but the mainland here (the rest of Ireland) is, of course, also an island. The same relative relationship might be extended from Ireland (as an island) to England, Scotland, and Wales.

This sense of relative islandness manifests itself in the novel's language. Initially, Skerrett, as an emissary from the mainland, thinks that the only language a civilised society should speak is the English language, and looks down on the use of the Irish language, and this in turn reinforces his sense that the cultural capital he brings from the mainland gives him power and value over the island community. These notions are evident from the initial passages of the book, such as the one where Coonan tells him no one in his future school speaks actually English: Skerrett looked at him arrogantly, stroked his beard, threw back his powerful shoulders with a jerk and then said in a booming voice "I'll soon make them learn it" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 8). Or the passage where he insists children of the school must be obedient to him as a master, and follow his word or be punished:

> "If anyone comes here to-morrow morning," he said, "with dirty hands or face, or with lice in his hair, I'll flog him to within an inch of his life. The first thing you have to learn here is to keep clean and to be obedient. Yes, and I'll flog your parents too. I'll go into your homes and flog everyone in them if you come here dirty." (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 21)

What will change Skerrett's point of view, however, is the clash with the harsh reality of life on the island, as opposed to the lavish and often tyrannical pretences of the local priest, Father Harry Moclair. The tension between the two is exacerbated by Skerrett's wife's mental health quickly deteriorating on the island, and the priest's grab for power. These events will contribute to help Skerrett form a new vision of life to the point his enemies will cross themselves when they pass him, one where the island appears indeed isolated from the mainland, but at the same time is also protected from what is hurting the mainland. As James Howard O'Brien writes in his analysis of the

novel, the arrival of money, and a new economy flourishing on the islands' coast quickly leads to the deterioration of both the traditional social existence of the island and the identity of the islanders.

The novel *Skerrett* takes place over fifteen years, between 1887 and 1902. These years are formational for the protagonist's new vision of traditional values, but are also formative years both in modern Irish history and in the modernisation of Western culture more widely. If before moving on the island Skerrett despised rural life, afterwards he changed his mind. In the narrative of the novel, tragedy helps Skerrett reshape his view of the world. The birth of his son brought him closer to a new language, the language of love, which, in the book, is the Irish language spoken on the island:

> "I'm very sorry Mrs. Turley," he said, "that I can't persuade you to take up Irish. Mark my words, you're not being fair to the girls in your school. Now that the Gaelic League is started, Irish is bound to come into its own, as the proper language of the country. Look what an advantage it would be to clever girls from this island to have a knowledge of Irish, when the language comes into its proper position." (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 123)

The premature death of his son, and his wife's subsequent descent into alcoholism and madness will bring him to question the rural systems in place on the island:

> He was undaunted. The more fortune turned against him, the more obstinate he became in his curious conviction that good must always triumph over evil and that virtue must be rewarded. Under the doctor's influence he absorbed the doctrines of philosophic anarchism, which have been made popular in Prince Kropotkin's work. The doctor mixed this philosophy with a mystical worship of the earth and the old pagan gods of the island. In-deed, he worshipped the island itself. "I don't believe in the occult," he said to Skerrett. "Indeed I don't believe in much outside visible life, but I feel myself being swallowed up by this island. I feel as if I were in love with it." (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 161)

And finally Father Moclair's betrayal will bring him to open rebellion and make him an unlikely hero, fighting a personal, maybe small fight, but with the background of the Irish Revolution:

> He felt greatly cheered and excited by his meeting with Ferris. "With such men behind me," he thought, "I could fight ten like Moclair. Let him do his damnedest now." And he began to make plans for harnessing Ferris's enthusiasm to a policy that

> would make victory possible. Still meditating on these plans and already seeing Moclair routed and humiliated, he entered his house. (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 108)

The love for the language of the island, the embrace of a new philosophy, and a rekindled friendship with the people around him will make Skerrett fall in love with the island. This feeling, this islandness, will shape his worldview and create a curious conviction that good must always triumph over evil, as mentioned in one of the above passages, a conviction that will guide his future actions.

Sjón (1962–) is a contemporary Icelandic author. His multifaceted identity and culture have indelibly shaped his literary endeavours, and created a specific footprint. This author stands as a pillar in the literary landscape emerging from Iceland, and his unique point of view, on top of his prolific writing activity makes him a contemporary figure worth exploring from a comparative perspective. His work offers a compelling account of Icelandic traditions and the connection they hold to other islands' multifaceted history. His work *Rökkurbýsnir* has been translated from Icelandic by Victoria Cribb in *From the Mouth of the Whale* (2011), and is taken into consideration for this analysis. In some respects, the plot bears many similarities with O'Flaherty's *Skerrett*. Jónas is a scholar exiled on an isolated island off the coast of Iceland. Like Skerrett on the Aran Islands, Jónas must familiarise himself and come to terms with life in exile on a barren, desperate land (Karlsson, 2020). The historical background of the story is 17th century Iceland, an island just emerging from the Reformation, transitioning from Catholicism to Lutheranism. The tension between these two factions resulted in persecution, which impact Jónas as he is banished for heresy. As in *Skerrett*, we see the island of *From the Mouth of the Whale* is full of individuals that see chances to antagonise Jónas, the chance to "trip" him at the entrance of his trial room is both physical and metaphorical. He walks to his fate, and at the end will go into exile in the islands surrounding Iceland. Jónas pays the fee of the rising tension between factions of Catholics and Lutherans because of his passion for education and learning. It is possible to draw comparisons between Jónas and Skerrett: even if the character of the two protagonists is different, they are both educated and on a quest to share this knowledge with others. While islanders might be open to this, it is the external, colonial force that opposes them. The mainland in *Skerrett* is a force that attempts to recreate itself on the island with a power that is intoxicating. We read Skerrett crying out:

> I'll see anybody in hell that dares meddle with my school. I made this school and my wife helped me to make it. We found these children a lot of savages and we have civilised them. We made this school what it is. Hands off us, then. Why don't they let us alone? I'll fight to the last breath against any interference from anybody. If I'm put to it, I'll take the scholars out of this

> school and teach them on the road same as was done long ago. Why should I bother with every damn fool that's sent down from Dublin to interfere with my work? I know what's useful to the scholars and I teach them what's useful. (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 75)

Similarly, in *From the Mouth of the Whale*:

> Jónas Pálmason of Strandir had done nothing more heinous than compile an anthology of harmless ancient lore, of uneven quality to be sure, as with any human endeavour, and most of it outmoded, but the man himself far from being a sorcerer was a curious and diligent scholar of the arts of the mind and hand, although unschooled. Clutching this fine testimonial and the writ signed by the king, I boarded ship at Copenhagen last spring, confident that once home on Icelandic soil I could expect justice to be restored. But my happiness proved short-lived, for among my fellow passengers were the emissaries of that slanderous forked tongue that had so softly licked the ears of certain men in Denmark the autumn before and had me thrown in gaol. (Sjón, 2011, p. 174)

In Jónas' inner monologue, we see how impatient he is to come back to his island and his community, to continue his work as a self-taught healer. His happiness however is "short lived" as there are powers at play that come from Denmark and that do not want him back to Iceland, helping the community. For Sjón, Iceland is, in fact, under Danish rule. The novel starts in 1635 and ends in 1639, at a time when the Danish colonisation of Iceland shaped the socio-political landscape of the island with lasting effects. Full separation between the two countries only happened in 1944 (Kristinsson, 2021). In fact, for a long time since the Danish took over the island in 1602, authorities exerted control over Iceland, imposing their own laws and suppressing local traditions, resulting in a forced process of cultural assimilation. Yet, Iceland was referred to as a *biland*, a dependency of Denmark (Karlsson, 2020). In the novel *From the Mouth of the Whale*, it can be argued that Jónas embodies cultural resistance to Denmark, and religion opposed to science in the broader perspective, while Skerrett remains caught between island periphery and metropolitan centre.

## Methodology

Gilles Deleuze (1925 - 1995) in his essay titled "Desert Islands" (2004), opens the discussion with the abstract idea of violence, which according to him is embedded in islands' existence:

> People like to call these two elements mother and father, assigning them gender roles according to the whim of their fancy. They must somehow persuade themselves that a struggle

> of this kind does not exist, or that it has somehow ended. In one way or another, the very existence of islands is the negation of this point of view, of this effort, this conviction. (Deleuze, 2004, p. 9)

To Deleuze, it is violence that connects islands and their wilderness: this is the very struggle from which islands are actually born. Deleuze highlights how the strife between water and land – that Deleuze describes above as what people call mother and father – creates two different types of islands, what he calls continental islands and oceanic islands. The distinction between the two lies in differing relationships between ocean and land, as continental islands are "accidental, derived and born of disarticulation, erosion, fracture," while oceanic islands are "originary, essentials (...) bringing to the light of day a movement from the lowest depths" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 9). Because islands, in Deleuze's view, are either born of fracture, or of the lowest depths, they constitute something non-human, something wild, and for this reason humans should not, logically, be drawn to them; and yet, humans are drawn to islands. The attractions of the dream of a life on an island, in this reasoning, is the inhuman quality of the island that should repel. It means "starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 10). This situation of extremes – islands that are violent and islands on which to dwell, island paradises and island infernos – creates a space of possibilities for a certain tension. This contradictory situation thus characterises Deleuze's island: both inhuman, and hence, for that very reason, compelling for humans. And hence, for Deleuze, there is thus a sense in which, even when the island is populated, at some level in the imaginary of islandness, it is deserted, an untouched territory at the origin of everything:

> An island doesn't stop being deserted simply because it is inhabited. While it is true that the movement of humans toward and on the island takes up the movement of the island prior to humankind, some people can occupy the island—it is still deserted, all the more so, provided they are sufficiently, that is, absolutely separate, and provided they are sufficient, absolute creators. Certainly, this is never the case in fact, though people who are shipwrecked approach such a condition. But for this to be the case, we need only extrapolate in imagination the movement they bring with them to the island. (Deleuze, 2004, p. 10).

Here we can approach one of the definitional qualities of islandness: a fundamental quality of being deserted, one that is not dependent on the actual population of the island. Of course, we may immediately think of counter-examples—Manhattan, for instance, or Singapore come to mind as examples of "densely populated small islands and population centres" (Grydehøj, 2015, p. 1)—where population density is the defining quality of

the island. However, as a working concept, Deleuze's notion of the desert island remains useful, if only in its counter-intuitiveness. Indeed, it could be said that the Western idea of the island developed around a similar idea of desertedness to that which we find in Deleuze. One that looks at the island from the mainland, and from this unbalanced, privileged position of power, from which the island appears as an empty container to fill and to exploit. As a philosopher who was always attuned to the potential of literary language, Deleuze saw the importance of approaching the island from a literary perspective, and so his understanding of islandness, desertedness and empty containers filled by colonialism, emerge in Deleuze's writing from the comparative perspectives of Daniel Defoe's *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and Jean Giraudoux's *Suzanne and the Pacific*. Deleuze would seem to have chosen *Robinson* because Robinson's island is a place outside of time as mainlanders understand it—"a place in a world that is slow to re-begin" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 14)—and yet, nonetheless, very material, "The second origin is thus more essential than the first, since it gives us the law of repetition, the law of the series, whose first origin gave us only moments" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 13). Deleuze attempts to draw a *fil rouge* connecting *Robinson Crusoe* to the novel *Suzanne and the Pacific* by using the myth of island paradises, and this proves to be a very effective tool for understanding the potential infinite cycle of creation typical of islands and important within Deleuzean thought.

What Deleuze fails to take into account in his islands' view, however, is the ocean. This water space around the island, which is at the same time a geographical border and part of the island itself, does not appear in his reflections regarding the deserted island. According to John R. Gillis (2012), this might be because up to the eighteenth century, the sea was somewhat invisible – the ocean was of interest only for the business it brought in terms of fishing, mostly, rather than a fit subject for literature or art . Hence, in the nineteenth century the relationship between water and land was not so obvious, when discussing islands. Nowadays, to bridge this gap, we can look at the challenges posed by the study of islands on their own terms. By incorporating Deleuzean views, researchers in island studies, a complex interdisciplinary field, can explore the concept of islandness from different angles. These angles include, of course, the role of history, but also geography in shaping the literary representation of islands, and the relationship of islanders with the liminal space of the shore, which includes land and water at the same time.

We can call upon other theoretical frameworks, however, when approaching a literary text from an island in comparative perspective. Because of the sheer variety of the literary traditions coming from islands and archipelagos, it is necessary to select specific novels when discussing islandness, a feature we can use to compare the literary island. For this reason, the sections of textual analysis that will follow, mimic a movement of coming and going, living and leaving, mapping and re-mapping the island: tidal

waves in written form, to reiterate the idea that islands are not static entities, they are places of movement where beliefs and identities are continuously rediscussed. This poetic approach resembles in its stylistic nature the tidalectics of Kamau Brathwaite (1930 - 2020). Brathwaite is recognised as one of the most important voices of the English-speaking Caribbean islands, and proposes a rejection of the notion of dialectic, in favour of rippled and tidal movements. He advocates for a less binary approach to archipelagic cultures, particularly focusing on the Caribbean, a society characterised by diverse cultural influences, systems of belief and, we might say, historical trajectories. To Brathwaite it is paramount to be able to capture these complexities and connections, to foster a more inclusive understanding of specifically island realities. In a passage from a lecture presented at Harvard University in 1979, he explains the phenomenon of creolisation:

> The Creole adaption to that [tradition] is the little child who, instead of writing in an essay "The snow was falling on the fields of Shropshire" (which is what our children literally were writing until a few years ago, below drawings they made of white snow fields and the corn-haired people who inhabited such a landscape), wrote "The snow was falling on the cane fields." The child had not yet reached the obvious statement that it wasn't snow at all, but rain that was probably falling on the cane fields. She was trying to have both cultures at the same time. But that is creolization. (Brathwaite, 1979, p. 270)

This simple example of the landscape highlights how, according to Brathwaite, what is known on the island, the rain, is confused with what is known in a far "mainland," the snow. The effort a hypothetical child puts into fitting an Other container into the island knowledge results in a new language, a Creole adaptation. This approach is exemplary of tidalectics, as it focuses on the consequences of a binary relation such as coloniser-colonised, or standard language-creole, and rejects it, resulting in an affirmation of a knowledge that has both cultures at the same time, the embodiment of a reality constantly evolving. It is also intriguing to note how it is a wild feature, linked to weather, to be taken as example by Brathwaite. Again, a hint of how wilderness cannot be changed by men, and yet influences their perceptions, their language even, particularly in island settings. Thus, it can be said tidalectics advocates for a recognition of diversity, which is typical of archipelagic realities. For this reason, this theoretical approach had also been employed by island studies scholars, such as Elizabeth DeLoughrey:

> DeLoughrey's adoption of Kamau Brathwaite's "tidalectics" in conceptualising historicity is significant in that it brings together historicity and the ocean, since they are tightly connected and developed through the environmental kinship

> of Caribbean authors. "Tidalectics" engages with the ocean as a meaningful space for island artists, not as aqua nullius, but rather as a repository of history. (Champion, 2020, p. 200)

It can be said DeLoughrey's adoption of tidalectics is an insightful development in the island studies discourse, as it gives recognition to the ocean, which becomes a meaningful space for creativity rather than an empty container, the "aqua nullius" mentioned above. In this instance, water ceases to be a geographical border defining the space of the island, and becomes a collective space of migration, and cultural exchange. This ocean-centric approach helps revaluating the role of water as a repository for historical narratives. In this sense, embracing tidalectics denotes a vision where authors are willing to engage with the complexities of those historical narratives, to cross new boundaries. In conclusion, tidalectics and island studies offer a unique lens to approach the island when it comes to literary analysis: the intersection between social and cultural dynamics, paired with the cyclical interplay offered by the tides, land and sea – and their influence on people – represents a new challenge to analyse novels such as *Skerrett* and *From the Mouth of the Whale*. In these two cases, the wilderness of the island means isolation, but also connections. In fact, we can further explore how island constraints and communal interdependence foster new ways of living on the island. The importance of exploring this connection is given by the fact that islandness forces humans to continuously re-negotiate with the wild – being it tides, rock, or winds – and shapes both willingly and unwillingly islanders' perceptions.

## The islands' wilderness

How do we define the shore? Even if geographically defined, the space of the shore is the ultimate fluid space. It is a truly metamorphic frontier, because of the presence of different entities sharing the same lands, winds, and waters. The shore is also the only space that, when discovered, has been mapped *from* the sea. According to John Gillis in *The Human Shore*, charts are needed to reflect safe harbours for mariners, not a land to dwell on (Gillis, 2012). And it is a safe harbour that Skerrett finds in Nara, when he arrives on the island. We meet the man "on a wild day in February 1887" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 5) when he is leaving Galway Bay with his wife abreast of the ship called Black Head. While the sailing ship is described as only "a brown-winged fly" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 5), the island of Ireland that the couple is leaving follows a different song. We are introduced to a harbour built beneath a "towering, black mountain" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 10). Here the weather brings clouds driven by the wind, with sudden sun rays coming through only occasionally. The metamorphic power of the island transforms the ship into a fly and its sails in "wind-filled bellies" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 5). They will reach the island at nightfall. The first words of Skerrett about Nara are, "It looks a lonely and wild place" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 7). He will spend fifteen years there.

The roads of Ballincarrig, what is considered the biggest city on Nara, are dark roads. The only space where Skerrett finds solace in the first three months of his job at the local school is a path on the southern cliffs, where he listens to "the thunder of the sea" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 25). Here he wonders how good it would be to be free and be able to wander off in search of riches and live the life of an adventurer because he is feeling imprisoned. And yet, "The sea, in thunder or in sunlit peace, became the blue dreamland of his awakening mind and not a ditch impassable beyond his prison walls. The island became his home and began to draw him towards its savage blossom" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 27). This is the first time the character manifests a sense of islandness, a deep connection with the island caused by the environment around him, that brings afloat a sense of longing, isolation, abandonment even. This feeling is shared with a doctor that befriends Skerrett on the island:

> Wouldn't it be nice if that duck got fond of me and came to see me now and again, even if it flies away? I made friend with a wild goose once. It used to fly away and then come back again. Then it stayed away altogether. Some scoundrel shot it, I suppose. (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 85)

Doctor Melia offers sympathies to Skerrett at a decisive point in the story, when the protagonist starts to clash with the local power. However, we notice in their discussions how the doctor feels a link to the island (the coming and going of ducks and geese), a deep connection with its most wild inhabitants, and the violence they share living among humans (described only as scoundrels shooting). In this story, the protagonist and what could be described as the only positive character both share feelings of islandness. Skerrett for the wildest areas of Nara, strolling around the southern cliffs, and Doctor Melia, at ease sharing his existence on the island among what he considers feathered friends.

Similarly to Doctor Melia, Jónas in *From the Mouth of the Whale* has a feathered friend. The scholar is exiled from Iceland to an islet on the coast. His exile follows a trial that saw Jónas as guilty of heresy. Like Doctor Melia, Jónas is also a physician. The shores of his island are populated by creatures. One of these is a sandpiper. These birds are usually found on islands' shores, and are known to fly low over water. Their diet is mainly flies and aquatic insects, and their song is a high-pitched whistle. A sandpiper is the first contact with life that Jónas has on the island and will become his first friend, to the point of naming it Jeremiah. Jónas describes it with great detail:

> A medium-sized fellow ... Beady brown eyes set close to his beak within pale surrounds ... The beak itself quite long, thick and powerful, with a slight downward curve at the end, dark in colour but lighter at the top ... No neck to speak of; a spry, stocky figure with short, tapering legs, a barrel chest and a big belly ... Head a dark grizzled brown, with a ruff extending

> from nape to mid-crown ... Clad in a grey-brown coat of narrow cut, with a faint purple sheen in the twilight; bright stockings, a speckled undershirt ... Importunate with his own kind, garrulous with others. (Sjón, 2011, p. 17)

He takes a long time to introduce Jeremiah, because he is actually describing himself, he concludes with "so men describe me" (Sjón, 2011, p. 17). While to Jónas all creatures come from "the same craftsman" (Sjón, 2011, p. 18) and share the beauty of the warm winds on the cold shore of Gullbjörn Island all the same, he tends to describe men as animals. Thus, if he is a sandpiper, knocking on a rock on top of the Gold Mould, the ones that sent him into exile are serpent brothers. To reinforce this vision of the world rooted in the island wilderness, the narration in first person leaves space on the page to a bestiary that details the creatures Jónas encounters on the shore, them being real as the sandpiper or more monstrous. This icy island is inhabited in the way Deleuze described, deserted and yet "born of disarticulation, erosion, fracture" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 9). It is born from volcanoes. Another way in which the island of Jónas configurates as a Deleuzean deserted island is that humans are not drawn to it, rather they are exiled there. This act of violence is at the core of the whole feature that shapes a peculiar sense of islandness, a feeling made of longing of an environment and being subdued to another's ferocity.

Thus, while we navigate the nuanced territories of Nara and Gullbjörn Island, their islandness emerges not as merely passive geographical setting, but as a dynamic entity participating into the human narratives unfolding upon the islands' shores. This section has laid some of the groundwork for a comprehensive understanding of how the islands' wilderness serves as both a backdrop and an active participant in narration of *Skerrett* and *From the Mouth of the Whale*, setting the stage for further exploration into the broader implications of wilderness and islandness within the island narratives.

## Islandness and community

It can be seen in both O'Flaherty and Sjón that island communities often exist at the intersections: of land and sea, of isolation and the natural world, of urban spaces and wilderness. Wilderness in this instance is not only the backdrop of the action in the novels, it also helps to create resilience and to define the presence (or absence) of solidarity in island settings.

Skerrett, like O'Flaherty, is bilingual, speaking English and Irish. This situation is an adaptation, as we have seen in Brathwaite, where both the colonised and the coloniser exist in one person. In fact, this duality makes him an enemy of Father Moclair, who in the economy of the novel represents the secular power of not only the Church, but of colonialism as well. Many historians have explored the interconnectedness of British colonialism and the role of the Irish Catholic Church in shaping the Irish experience. Political and economic measures were levied upon Ireland, and in this colonial effort the Catholic Church played a significant role. In this instance, there is a

continuity between these two forces in upholding a status-quo, a structural hierarchy that is exactly what brings Skerrett and Father Moclair astray, which in the bigger picture symbolises the evolution of Ireland's impacted identity. This is felt not only in the passages that involve the presence of the priest, but also in those relating to other characters such as the fisherman Coonan. O'Flaherty presents Coonan as a now middle-class rate-collector who found fortune thanks to Father Moclair. To Coonan, his newfound position in the island's society is so important that his clothes differ from traditional attire on purpose, to project an idea of superiority. In fact, those wearing the "native costume of the island, rawhide shoes, blue frieze drawers held with a belt, hand-knitted, of coloured threads, a sleeveless frieze waistcoat, blue in front and white at the back, dark blue frieze shirt with white buttons from throat to breast, wide-brimmed black felt hat" (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 10) do not find him welcoming. This behaviour is condoned by Father Moclair, who:

> had come at the very height of the Land League agitation and he had at once taken command of the people as a soldier and statesman as well as a priest. Roads, piers, lighthouses, fishing boats came in his trail rapidly and in Ardglas a native trading class came into being, together with a group of petty officials, a rate-collector, a sanitary officer, a harbour master, all tending to give the people an idea of their new importance and dignity. (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 36)

In this passage describing the priest, the end highlights how dignity comes from afar, and not within the island. This ominous sentence brings afloat perceptions some contemporary mainland readers might already have about distant islands, and reiterates the idea that these spaces are open for conquest and colonisation from a power such as the English Crown and the Church. While this stance on dignity is not O'Flaherty's opinion of course, the author pins it on Father Moclair as representative of a commander of people.

Similarly, in the small town from which the story of *From the Mouth of the Whale* starts, we see another group of petty officials as in *Skerrett*, with a council of priests and bishops as its head:

> As Nightwolf Pétursson's hired thugs were driving me from the court with blows and ape-like howls, the younger brother of my old enemy, Sheriff Ari Magnússon of Ögur, saw his chance to trip me up at the gate, for the further amusement of the hyenas (...) A fall was prepared for me, but even as I was flying headlong into the mud, I felt a soft hand stroke along the chain where the irons chafed worst, and I was able to leave the court with my head held high. (Sjón, 2011, pp. 25–26)

In this passage we see human nature through the eyes of Jónas, reminiscing this moment from his island. The hired thugs speak in ape-like howls, the audience is a pack of hyenas ready to laugh at the amusement of Jónas'

demise. And then, there is mud, watery soil to remind everyone present that Jónas will soon part ways with the safety of the village. It is hard to find that type of soil on the icy shores of the fjords. In this instance, the episode with both sheriffs and clergy in *From the Mouth of the Whale* is emblematic of the importance of religious law, which occupies, in the Iceland of the novel, the same central spotlight as secular law. The presence of the Church and its role within the island's community is also raised and explored in the memoir *The Aran Islands* by J.M. Synge (1871-1909). Synge, a central figure of the Irish Literary Revival, travelled to the Aran Islands in 1898 and after this first contact continued to journey to this archipelago in an attempt to re-discover rural Ireland. In the memoir *The Aran Islands* (1906) he collects observations and reflections on rural life, and particularly island life. As a keen observer, Synge combines here elements of travelogue and personal reflection to chronicle the Aran Islands' life. His attention to detail is matched by his meticulous description of not only landscapes, but also customs, practices, rituals, and social structures. While one could fall into the trap of romanticising such vision, Synge maintains literary realism. From the work of Synge for instance, it emerges how the presence of the Catholic Church was central, and formal schooling often blurred with catechism:

> Then he sat down in the middle of the floor and began to recite old Irish poetry, with a exquisite purity of intonation that brought tears to my eyes though I understood but little of the meaning. On our way home he gave me the Catholic theory of the fairies. When Lucifer saw himself in the glass he thought himself equal with God. Then the Lord threw him out of Heaven, and all the angels that belonged to him. While He was 'chucking them out', an Archangel asked Him to spare some of them, and those that were falling are in the air still, and have power to wreck ships, and to work evil in the world. From this he wandered off into tedious matters of theology, and repeated many long prayers and sermons in Irish that he had heard from the priests. (Synge, 1906, Part I)

From this point of view, O'Flaherty puts his character into action in a world we have only seen through, for example, Synge's eyes, at a distance, as if through a looking glass. The beauty of the novel *Skerrett* lays in the fact that it elevates the complexities of island life, the role of the island and the islander. The above mentioned monologue in *Skerrett* is also the setting for the protagonist's rebellious activity: this is the very first argument he has with the establishment of the island. From looking up to Father Moclair, the holy man, for guidance, Skerrett quickly understands the Church is playing with the education of the islanders, attempting to keep the *status-quo*. Skerrett will openly challenge the position of the establishment, the interference the mainland attempts to have on the island:

> "You had better control your language when you are talking to me," said Moclair in a menacing tone. "Lately I've noticed that you're getting a little too big for your boots. Don't forget I'm your manager. You'll run this school in the way I tell you, and you'll behave yourself when you're talking to me".
>
> "You may be the manager," said Skerrett, "but I'm master in this school." (O'Flaherty, 1988, p. 75)

Father Moclair is aggressive towards Skerrett, he intimates him to better control the language at the beginning of this passage. He might refer to Skerrett's attitude, but potentially also his inflection, as we know by this point the character has embraced the islander in him and has started learning and actively speaking the language of the locals. The protagonist replies confidently affirming his role in the society as master of the school, meaning a secular point of reference and role model the people of the island can look up to.

O'Flaherty's novel resembles a biography. We follow this character through the years. We are near to him when his son is born and when he starts to develop issues in his marriage. We learn how this impacts his work and his mindset. We follow him all the way across this island, and we learn of every corner and every rock. We learn to know Jónas in a similar way, however, his narrator is much more intrusive, and controls the point of view more often than Skerrett as if he feels the need to advocate for himself from his exile, he is so terrified that he states even the marrow of his smallest bones shook like the wings of a fly. While O'Flaherty is capable of transmitting a sense of island life and island communities that not many writers achieved, Sjón experiments with the years we spend with Jónas, pushing the reader to empathise with him in the harsh iced landscape of Iceland. The islands where Jónas is exiled are violently connected to one another and present a continuous strife between water and land: the shore is populated with monsters and sometimes monstrous humans visit too. Angeline A. Kelly in her study of O'Flaherty's short stories (1972) details the relationship between characters and environment, and the importance they uphold in the bigger economy of preoccupations of those characters. This is also true for Sjón's novel. Indeed, in *Skerrett* and *From the Mouth of the Whale*, the environment is literally the source of madness. For both Skerrett and his wife at the initial stage of the story, the vision of the rocky Aran Islands is depressive, just as it is source of terrible loneliness for Jónas. This only lasts until the healing power of the barren nature finally mends the need of the characters for the mainland's set of rules and laws, thus subverting the order on the island.

*Skerrett* upholds the Irish author's capacity to depict the complexities of island life, with a style influenced by personal life, political dynamics, and social constraints. O'Flaherty captures, through Skerrett's struggle, the difficulties of an entire community and, even more at large of an entire archipelagic reality, the islandness of Ireland and the Aran Islands. On the

other hand, Sjón's novel paints a landscape of isolation in *From the Mouth of the Whale*, enhancing islandness to the point the protagonist's loneliness and islandness blur together with the harsh environment:

> The sheet of ice has its beginning halfway down the beach and surrounds the whole island with its sudden creaks and eerie groans, pleated like one of the Lord Chief Justice's starched ruffs. On the beach all life has been scorched by the cold; the sand is as hard as stone, the seaweed withered. Haddock and cod lie under the furthest rim of the ice, if they have not frozen to death too, but I have neither the strength nor the nerve to go out there, lacking a boat. What would I do there anyway? Talk the fish up through the ice? (Sjón, 2011, p. 165)

*Skerrett*'s metaphors for colonialism (the construction of the pier with the consequent rise of a new ruling class), rural poverty (the Irish language initially mistreated by the protagonist), and traditional societal structures (the relationship with the local priest) serve as tools to critique the prevailing systems oppressing the lives of the islanders. Similar metaphors can be found in the moments of *From the Mouth of the Whale* when the protagonist has to face the community and the rural beliefs deployed against him or his family.

Finally, *Skerrett* demonstrates O'Flaherty's ability to intertwine personal narratives with broader social and historical contexts, which makes this novel a brilliant example of the universal themes that resonate across different island contexts, informing the concept of islandness for what concerns the Aran Islands. The ongoing processes of decolonisation that are represented in *Skerrett*, and that concern Ireland and the Aran Islands, can vary significantly depending on specific historical, social, and political contexts of different realities taken into account. As a result of these intricate processes, the postcolonial era does not adhere to a uniform timeline. Rather, it occurs as a series of unique and region-specific narratives. However, acknowledging the trajectories of certain realities can help approach different literary spaces in comparative perspective, to follow new waves of genres and themes, and to bring afloat the island's unique perspective.

## Conclusions

This article explored and presented the connections that can be drawn across different island cultures, focusing on Ireland and Iceland. The investigation started with the aim of exploring the relationship between different literary representation of islandness, and the connection between the latter and an island's wilderness. We connected Ireland and Iceland through the experience of exile as seen in *Skerrett* and *From the Mouth of the Whale*, analysing the scholars' lives in exile, the mutations of their beliefs, their relationship with the wilderness, the shore, and the life within the coastal communities. Through this analysis, this article intended to answer two key

questions: (a) How important is wilderness when approaching the literary island? (b) Do wilderness and islandness influence each other in the eyes of those living the island?

We explored the construction of the island from the perspective of Deleuze. Namely, how the island is an absolute origin, and what does it mean for literary fiction set among island shores (Deleuze, 2004). We continued by examining how islandness plays a part in the evolution of a character, and how the island is a micro-cosmos upholding both tradition and revolution. The article also delt with the literary analysis of specific novels that come from different island realities, encompassing Ireland and Iceland. The stories in this article were selected carefully, in an attempt to focus on a very specific literary representation of islandness that authors such as O'Flaherty and Sjón are able to summon in their novels. While the authors' writing styles are different, their protagonists move in a very similar environment, both urban and deserted, and find themselves in the difficult position of familiarising themselves with loneliness, a feeling shaped by their experience on an island, and that soon melts into what we defined in this article as islandness. In both novels the reader can identify the multi-faceted feature of islandness. First, in the liminality of the island, it pushes the characters to challenge their own beliefs. Second, through the islands' wilderness, it forces both protagonists to adapt and develop new skills to face changes. Last, acknowledging the islands' history, it helps identifying pivotal moments in the history of both islands taken into account, and better contextualise the tides, the coming and going of decisions, and events. In this instance, such a perspective is dominant in *Skerrett*, where we see first-hand a good representation of how the fight for independence from the power of the mainland is actually a metaphor for a broader fight, the Irish struggle against the British colonial power. Similarly in Sjón's novel, Jónas decides to come to terms with the loneliness of the island, its liminality, and decides to collect his thoughts in communion with nature to better understand a world in Deleuzean transition. As explained throughout the article, these literary representations would not be viable without the structure of the island to uphold them.

To verify whether the representation of islands corresponds in-between disciplines, for instance island studies, and comparative literature concerning islands, this article approached texts that represent the island in its physical space, deeply characterised by wilderness and the shore, ultimately analysing the community living among them. Godfrey Baldacchino highlights that "one must be aware of how deep-rooted and stultifying the social consequences of islandness can be" (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 49). Both Skerrett and Jónas, and their communities too, could not escape the consequences of living on Nara and Gullbjörn. While the geographic context of the island inspires authors to approach this space as insular, the evolution of the characters' arcs demonstrates on the other hand how connected these realities are to each other. It would be beneficial for the fields of comparative literature and island studies to further research representations of islandness in novels

featuring islands. As Yaso Nadarajah also puts it, scholarly research on the literary island opens the island up to contemporary existence. This activity of engaging with human and non-human aspects helps combine island studies with more "critical decolonial understandings" of spaces (Nadarajah, 2021, p. 170). Thus, it would also be positively challenging for researchers to encompass more texts coming from islands as it would help shade light on this specific topic. While in this article we analysed a work in English language, and an Icelandic work that has been translated in English, there is the cannon of novels in the Irish language, specifically from the Aran Islands, that awaits to be incorporated into the academic research in island studies.

Submitted: September 22, 2024 CST. Accepted: December 02, 2024 CST. Published: December 31, 2024 CST.

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