

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: Art and Islandness in Sinéad Gleeson's 'Hagstone'

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Godfrey Baldacchino writes that human borders, in contrast with nature's boundaries, have zero porosity and begrudgingly condone leakages. This liquidity of the human condition can be particularly true in some spaces where humans decide to settle next to the sea: on islands. To further this understanding, we turn and look at islands' art and the representation of islandness in literature. In the novel 'Hagstone' by Sinéad Gleeson, the concept of islandness is simultaneously pinned down and complicated: Island studies through the years has highlighted three key aspects of islandness (geography, ecology, and culture), and yet scholars have struggled to identify universally defining traits of islandness. Through close reading, this article presents an analysis of 'Hagstone' that leads us to understand the link between art and islandness, and the latter's submerged features present in the novel, and highlights how islandness itself shapes the character Nell's relationship with her art throughout the story. How do those who live on the island narrate their experience with islandness? And how do creative practices contribute to a more nuanced understanding of islandness? Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis and Island studies, this paper contributes to a better understanding of the literary art produced on and for the island. The intricate relationship between island and artist emerges in Gleeson's work, in a world where reality drifts back and forth in waves, and an artist's only option is to exist inside her art.

Introduction

This essay presents an analysis of *Hagstone*, the first novel by Irish writer Sinéad Gleeson, to engage with the ocean and the sea “as a meaningful space for island artists, not as aqua nullius, but rather as a repository of history” (Champion, 2020). To look at the art produced on the island leads us to understand the link between art and islandness, highlighting how islandness itself shapes the relationship the protagonist of the novel has with her art throughout the story. How do those who live on the island narrate their experience with islandness? How do creative practices contribute to a more nuanced understanding of islandness? Using an interdisciplinary approach

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that combines close reading, literary analysis and Island studies, this paper contributes to a better understanding of the literary art produced on and for the island. This study also reconfigures the shore of the island as a space for ritual practices and where islandness actively shapes art and lived experiences.

Island studies has long questioned the unique position of islands, looking at these spaces not as merely geographic pieces of land but as a conceptual framework through which to explore broader cultural, social, and environmental issues (Baldacchino, 2008, 2018). However, studying islands ‘on their own terms’, as Grant McCall (1994) suggested, while advocating for empowerment (such as reclaiming culture and history from colonialism, for example) also implies new pitfalls for scholars. The expression:

marks an uncomfortable relationship, intimating that the process of inquiry may still be directed by outside forces, although presumably more well-meaning ones. ‘Island studies’ is explained not as a pursuit by islands/islanders, or with them, not even for them, but of them (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 37).

Thus, examining islands, both real and imagined, poses some methodological challenges, given their emergence as sites of interplay and connection. One of these challenges is presented and possibly emphasised by the very concept of “islandness”: this is not simply a fixed quality, but a relational construct, continuously produced and reinterpreted through narratives, histories, and representations (Baldacchino & Starc, 2021). Within this challenging field, the exploration of the relationship between art and islandness becomes particularly compelling for scholars sitting at the crossroads of Island studies and other disciplines, offering new ways to examine how aesthetic practices articulate, challenge, and reframe the meaning of liminality. Laurie Brinklow (2023) agrees with this point of view, suggesting that art provides its own language to study islandness, capturing affective and symbolic dimensions often elusive to the traditional academic discourse: it gives a chance “to creatively reimagine academic research” (Brinklow, 2023, p. 105) and offers unique opportunities to gain insights into people’s understandings of islandness (Brinklow, 2013, 2023).

Different types of art, such as paintings or literary works, can often embody the lived experience of liminality, translating folklore, community, and ecological precarity into an aesthetic form. To investigate them means to delve deeper into the practice of archipelagraphy developed by Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2001), which foregrounds creative practices as critical to understand the interconnectivity of islands, archipelagos, and oceans – highlighting the latter as an integral space of the island, not necessarily a border.

To engage with the ocean as a space of the island means to shift the gaze on a space that does not exist *per-se*, but is integrated: an assemblage of multiple perceived spaces, that come together because of the ecology they produce. To fill this gap, Philp Hayward (2012) reflects on what term to

give this notion, and opts for aquapelagos, or aquapelagic assemblages. The term serves to emphasize “the manner in which the aquatic spaces between and around groups of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to social groups’ habitation of land” (Hayward, 2012, p. 1). Hayward focuses on Indonesia, Japan and Oceania to develop this working concept, however researchers quickly picked up the idea of working with spaces and ecologies that influence each other. Erika Hayfield and Helene Nielsen (2022) look at the aquapelago and emotions, developing the concept of aquapelagic belonging, while Ayasha Guerin (2024) observes the aquapelago from the lens of violent rearrangements of life due to human impact. Approaching the arts, Lindsay Bremner (2016) notes how architects have used the archipelago as a land-sea binary construct to build upon new environments, taking as an example the Indian Ocean Aquapelago. The concept of aquapelago helps and informs studies dealing with water, land, islands and the interconnections that happen between these spaces and the forms of life they produce.

Similarly, cultural ecologies as explored by DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) situate art as an interpretive mode within postcolonial and environmental frameworks, and highlight the role of creative expression in understanding colonial legacies, ecological vulnerability, and cultural resilience: “Art enters into the general conversation as an object before giving rise to exchanges of signifying words. Thus, painting and writing have distinctive modes of mediating the nature of the universe and the nature of its human inhabitants” (Benson, 2011, p. 63). Such a view on art and literature aligns with broader debates concerning the cultural and ecological aspects of islands, within Island studies and outside of it. Taken together, these studies help position art as a contributing force to islandness, actively shaping it, and furthering the understanding of how islands are conceived by their own communities – ‘on their own terms’ to quote McCall once again.

Recent contributions to Island studies have placed emphasis on decolonial methodologies (Nadarajah et al., 2022; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016), and the need to investigate how knowledge about the island is produced (Grydehøj et al., 2020, 2025). Farbotko et al. (2023) call for an ‘emergent learning’ in Island studies research, advancing an approach to resist colonial methodologies, and instead cultivate collaborative modes of research: this might “raise dilemmas for those wanting to apply methodologies to island research and negotiate ethical relations across multiple geographies and knowledge systems” (Farbotko et al., 2023, p. 96). What Farbotko et al. (2023) seem to imply is that multiple geographies defined as islands may not see themselves as such, or they may fall outside of the definition of what is an island, or may even disagree on what experiencing ‘islandness’ means. This is echoed by Grydehøj and Su’s (2025) point on why ‘islandness’ matters in research in general and not only in island studies: because it is paramount to understand “how different peoples feel islandness matters and how this affects human behaviour” (p. 3).

For these reasons, islands' knowledge systems have to be respected as such. This concept resonates with the articulation by Nadarajah et al. (2022) of the need for scholars to interrogate their own positionality so as to resist the reproduction of dominant knowledge systems and power relations (see also Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2024). In relation to this article's analysis of art and islandness, it is good to take into account Nimführ and Meloni (2021), who similarly discuss how decolonial thinking demands restructuring of how islands are represented – putting the accent on lived experiences and local knowledge over dominant or imposed frameworks. Relevant here is Pete Hay's (2013) work on how islanders see 'boundaries' and their surroundings, intellectually exploring greater trans-island commonality through the "grounded experiences of island living" (p. 229) while highlighting the importance of the identity-constructing factor he names as 'land/sea'. In a related manner, Jonh R. Gillis (2014) illuminates 'island ecotones' (p. 155), a littoral dimension of adaptability and resilience that further underscores the necessity to challenge the (still) dominant idea of islands as isolated spaces. Such critiques open pathways for engaging with art not merely as a cultural product, but also as a method of decolonisation.

Therefore, this article explores the intersections of art and islandness in the Irish novel *Hagstone*, which presents an Irish artist living on an island off the coast of Ireland. *Hagstone* was published in 2024 and is the first novel by Sinéad Gleeson, an author known to the wider public for her collections of essays, such as *Constellations – Reflections from Life* (2019), awarded the Non-fiction Book of the Year Award at the Irish Book Awards. *Hagstone* follows Nell, a young artist living on a secluded island off the coast of Ireland, at a pivotal moment in her career: she rejected one too many opportunities to work 'on the mainland' (here intended as Ireland) and is now struggling with a creative block – everything seems at hand, and yet out of reach for her. Her ideas and materials for her performance art come from the island: sand from the shore, lights from the nearby lighthouse, and birds' skulls all populate her pieces. Like many others on the island, however, Nell is affected by the Summoning: "A phenomenon that plagues the island, with no warning or pattern. Some hear it, others can't. How it triggers other unexplained happenings. How it drives some mad" (Gleeson, 2024, p. 13).

This sound comes from the core of the island, impacts every native creature on its shores, and drives men insane. Tourists visiting Bانشلا cannot hear the Summoning, but "on every tour someone asks about it" (Gleeson, 2024, p. 13). Women of all ages bleed at its sublime sound. On the island, the Summoning inspires universal fear, with the sole exception of the Iníons, a women's commune led by the elusive Maman, who dwell in Rathglas, an abandoned monastery nestled between an old sacred well and the sea. They worship Danu, an Irish water goddess. The fluidity of the Iníons' life is marked by hours of long work, in a sort of ritual, resembling movements of ebb and flow: they wake up with the sun, and start to tend the gardens, collect the weeds, and clean the place where they live, before sitting for a

communal breakfast to be consumed in silence. Maman was the first Iníon in Rathglas, and soon many others followed – women looking for a place to forgive and forget, and be left in peace. Nell finds an Iníon life somewhat appealing; however, she reflects on how such strict daily practices would clash with her creative process. Nevertheless, her artist’s disposition craves new, sublime experiences, and she happily accepts a proposal coming from Maman: to stage a piece of art for Rathglas, to be performed at Samhain. This novel prompts us to ask: how do creative practices contribute to a more nuanced understanding of islandness?

Art and Islandness

Parallel to the methodological shift in Island studies that highlights new decolonising practices, urging researchers to respect, support, and understand decolonisation efforts (Farbotko et al., 2023; Nimführ & Meloni, 2021), Foley et al. (2023) argue that while islandness can be a contested concept, it must be understood as a dynamic construct, shaped by shifting cultural and political processes, rather than as an essential or static condition ascribed to the island:

We begin by considering islandness as smallness, recognizing that though many entry points into island studies relate to size in some way, what constitutes small is dependent on both context and worldview. Next, we consider islandness as culture, and the concept of island identity, which is expressed in varied forms. Finally, we consider framings of islands as others, and the extent to which contemporary narratives linked to islands are really inherent to islands or not. Ultimately, we conclude that although there is much to be gained from appreciating differing understandings of islandness, these multiple meanings make it critical to reflect on context wherever the term is used, and exercise care in assigning attributes and outcomes to islandness. (Foley et al., 2023, p. 1800).

In their practice to advance the notion of islandness as a dynamic construct, Foley et al. (2023) identify three key aspects of it: smallness, culture in varied forms, and Othering. Smallness is linked to islandness due to the fact that while not all islands are small, there is a need to identify a portion of space to analyse; culture, in forms such as art and literature for example – an aspect that deeply grounds this very article; and finally the practice of Othering, which Foley et al. (2023) originally overturn: “deconstructing and overturning the island as the ‘other’ emerges in expressing islandness as a social construct” (p. 1808). Vannini and Taggart’s (2013) approach to islandness reinforces this point, emphasizing the performative dimensions of insular experiences: how island life is enacted, sensed, and lived beyond discursive representation. This aligns closely with the artistic practices narrated in *Hagstone*, where Nell often privileges embodied forms of

expression as a way of experiencing islandness. Art, in this sense, functions as a practice: to highlight qualities that conventional scholarship may overlook. When read alongside artistic practices, these contributions to the field suggest that art has the potential not only to reflect, but also to be an active part of the discourse on islandness, foregrounding alternative narratives of relationality and possibilities.

In *Hagstone*, the protagonist Nell finds herself speechless when she needs to articulate life on the island of Banshla. She thinks that “it’s hard to describe to outsiders what the isolation is like” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 16). This feeling, that can be ascribed to islandness, is made more evident by the relationship the artist develops with the island, making this literary *topos* in the Atlantic Ocean the centre of her art. This intimate relationship is highlighted by the author’s stylistic choices: the first pages of the novel list colours and shades of both land and water. Terms are used to colorise the reader’s vision, even if the reader is unfamiliar with the Irish coast: moss, anthracite, cobalt even – “One day she will replicate all that green in another corner of the world; in a place whose palette is more than cobalt, moss and coal” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 305). These very specific shades contribute to create an immersive experience when reading *Hagstone*.

However, the novel is not about colours. The protagonist is an artist voluntarily displaced on an island off the coast of Ireland, where wilderness and islandness contribute to her art. Even the title of the novel highlights an extra connection between the island, its wilderness, and the experience of islandness: a hagstone is a stone the waves worked on so hard that they created a hole in the middle of it. While the geographical and ecological features of the island of *Hagstone* might point towards insularity, there is an array of motifs and connections to be made through islandness in this and other texts (Mastronardo, 2024): the use of the Irish language, for instance, to leverage folk knowledge; social structures in place on the island, that resonate with broader historical and thus universal themes; the cyclical recurrence that informs the protagonist’s art. Voluntarily displaced here means something very specific: Nell’s exile on the island is linked to her uneasiness with having a life even in Ireland – an island, always referred to in the novel as ‘the mainland’. Nell’s inflexion in this instance resonates with Island studies research, for instance the work of Dahl and Depraetere (2007), who identify islands as ‘mainland’ from the islanders’ perspective, and of Baldacchino (2008) concerning “the fractal nature of islands” (p. 47).

Searching for Islandness in Art

Nell’s relationship with islandness and the intimate isolation she feels inform her art, but also her personal growth processes. In this instance, Sinéad Gleeson aids the reader in decoding the sense of islandness in Nell by providing an afterword that lists the artworks explicitly referenced in the novel alongside their artists. She explores the epigraph of the novel, taken from the sculpture *Scallop* by Maggi Hambling (1945–), where we read “I hear those voices that will not be drowned” – a quote from Benjamin

Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*. These voices connect us with the book's Summoning. Gleeson worked in the arts as a journalist, essayist, and critic: thus, the choice of Maggi Hambling's art is not by chance. Hambling's seascapes represent both wave and individual, and tell a story on the shore, about the shore, and about our relationship with it. The work of this artist has a deeply emotional input: waves, and shells, and scallops intertwine with the waves, the sand, and the wind, participating in a dimension of life on the shore that is textually represented in *Hagstone*. Maggi Hambling is not the only artist Gleeson praises in her first novel. The writer pays tribute to the art of Atsuko Tanaka (1932-2005) and Cecilia Vicuña (1948–), and their relationships with the sea, the waves, and the liminal shore. It is a declaration that brings with it a certain degree of *gravitas*, choosing art that is made on the shore and at the same time is often characterised by its own, inevitable passing. Art, as fluid as the tides.

Atsuko Tanaka's body of work is famous for its relationship with *Gutai* (the avant-garde collective that shook Japan in the 1950s) and the instability of female subjectivity (Kunimoto, 2013): Gleeson focuses on the side of her art that is linked to reconstruction, and legacy. In fact, one of Tanaka's most famous pieces, apart from *Denkifuku* or *Electric Dress* (1956), is *Work (Bell)*, which no longer exists. In the absence of the original, Tanaka herself oversaw several reconstructions during her lifetime. The initial interactive sound installation consisted of bells arranged throughout the space, enabling visitors to engage directly with it. This process (existing art to lost art to reconstructed art) allows us, as art's witnesses but also readers, to stop for a moment and think about immanence, legacy, connections – as if on a shore, in front of a coming tide.

In the case of Cecilia Vicuña, this relationship is even clearer: the shore, its dissolution, and the concept of memory and legacy contribute to creating feature pieces that are made on the shore or near water (such as the *Quipu in the Gutter* from 1989) and, for this reason, are meant to constantly disappear. While this artist experimented with sound, painting, poetry, part of her art dwells on precarity, particularly her *Quipus*: a way of telling history, and a poetic form of resistance. This technique of recording events was banned after the Conquest of the Andes (1532-1572), when Quipus were burned and history was lost. While reappropriating this way of telling history, Vicuña connects history and the elements in a narration that puts the artist at the centre – much like Gleeson's novel. Thus, it is clearer how Gleeson praises performance artists and the fingerprints they left on the experience of this Irish author as a writer. Nell's art in this instance is linked to water and seascapes: it begins with a birth in the sand, a performance on the very shores, and continues with light and life and a durational piece about the concept of time passing. Gleeson crafts a novel that knows from the beginning what it is going to display: Gillis (2004) wrote about islands at the end of time; Jonathan Pugh (2013) interestingly pointed to Walcott and the loss of history (meant as a linear, consequential trajectory) on islands.

Gleeson builds Nell to support these ideas: Nell's work envisions the artist and the island at its centre. She describes inhabiting the local lighthouse for a week, remaining awake and upright in the lantern room, where coloured gel filters would transform the beacon's light across the island. The result is Nell's silhouette refracting over the land, and just a moment afterwards beaming out into the ocean. Land and water, meeting in waves. Nell on the island, Nell out at sea. An infinite cycle, where woman and island are one through art. For Nell, this cycle ends with a Tibetan Sky Burial: "to have her corpse cut up and left to be eaten by vultures" (Gleeson, 2024, p. 34). She remembers this friend's and artist's funeral wishes, looking at seagulls "squawking over the feast of a seal carcass" (p. 34). We are reminded, as readers, how art makes life bearable, how art pushes the boundaries of the island, of the land, of the sea, and even of life itself. And how art allows us to create something infinite: precisely as Nell's durational piece about the concept of time passing.

The vertebrae of the island, the body of the woman

In *Blue Hills and Chalk Bones*, one of the essays from the collection *Constellations – Reflections from Life*, Sinéad Gleeson (2019) writes that the body is an afterthought. It means we pay no mind to its hard work – lungs that help us breathe, a heart that beats in the background, movements following our everyday... until one day something changes, something shatters. Similar reflections on bodily autonomy appear in *Hagstone* too, crystallised in Nell's youth, in the Iníons' rituals, even in the very island's descriptions: women and the island are experiencing an endless cycle of birthing, carrying, washing. This cycle that happens on the shores of the island pushes Nell to reflect on her condition, and by extension, the condition of the women before her: how she inherited a form of islandness from her grandmother that she sees indeed stuck in an endless cycle of prescribed womanhood, and yet how womanhood for her has changed, and desire for a husband transformed in the artist into a desire for the island.

There is a longstanding tradition in literature of writers personifying water and land with gendered qualities, often associated with motherhood, inheritance, and sacrifice. For example, by examining the recurring symbolic patterns in Atlantic Canadian literature (Dawson et al., 2018; Pope, 2006), we can observe how land is often associated with tradition, memory and quiet endurance, while the ocean is endowed with erosive force, danger and lethal attraction. This is particularly evident in Alistair MacLeod's fiction describing life in Cape Breton Island, which is rooted in the relationship between water and migration. The author won in 2001 the International Dublin Literary Award for *No Great Mischief* (MacLeod, 2001), a novel describing the life of two brothers from their childhood in Cape Breton Island to the hardships of the mines of Northern Ontario. Here the striking difference between the idyllic island childhood and the nightmares of the work in the mines is given by the description of the landscapes, but also in the songs inherited by their mother. The *Lament for Cape Breton*, found in Gaelic and English, goes: "I

see far, far away. / I see far o'er the tide; / I see Cape Breton, my love, / Far away o'er the sea. / There's a longing in my heart now / To be where I was / Though I know that it's quite sure / I never shall return" (MacLeod, 2001, p. 16). We can see here how the sea is a force that demands sacrifice, be it death or exile.

This vision however differs with those presented by Gleeson, who does not look at the sea as a border that limits the islander's experience; on the contrary, water becomes an active shaper of the character's identity. This difference is supported by the concept of the female gaze in literature, and how women observe, interpret, and narrate spaces and relationships in a fundamentally different way from male-centred narratives. We can see this enacted through the diametrically different perspective of Nell as an artist from the traditional, Joycean vision of the artist (Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). In this instance, Macmahon and André (2018) note how the illusion is that the island is always at a distance, something to conquer, and the female gaze on the other hand re-directs this sight to a narration not shaped by the endgame of expansion, but by the relational journey to understand space as a lived condition – not a mastered one.

The island of *Hagstone* is often personified. Covered in black water and white foam, it has a cliff face, and the waves dress it in "white tulle" (Gleeson, 2024, p. 35): "From the far end of the strand, the headland resembles a woman from an old island myth. Below the cliff face, waves froth the shore" (Gleeson, 2024, p. 7). Anatomically, almost surgically, Gleeson describes the island as deserted and yet full of hidden life – birds wailing, foxes howling, the absence of delicate flowers:

Banshla is deserted this morning, save for the birds. Two large gulls are engaged in a tug of war over mackerel innards. The speckled one is victorious, sweeping towards the cliff to eat the spoils. The strand is deserted. ... The water is as cold as a fjord. (Gleeson, 2024, p. 34)

Nell longs to grow flowers, particularly Delphiniums and waxy stargazers, but it is almost impossible on the island, between the unforgiving wind and the sound. The Summoning has its own way of delving into the islanders' hearts, and its random happenings can be brutal:

The wail of the birds stops suddenly, followed by the sound itself coming in. A tinny thud close above. Then another, and another. The windows are ceiling-high; she can only imagine the scene outside. The birds keep dropping for several minutes. The roof is horribly dented and Nell fears it might cave in. When the noise finally stop, she opens the door. Outside, twenty or so of the poor creatures are scattered on the ground. Some unscathed, almost peaceful. Others utterly mangled.

Twisted legs, eyes scooped out on impact, a blizzard of feathers. The smell of death mixed with seawater. A long gannet, twisted and bloody, lies broken in the basket of her bike. (Gleeson, 2024, pp. 35–36).

Birds die and a crimson rain falls on the island, a sound that comes so unexpectedly and so powerfully that it shuts any other sound quiet: birds stop squawking right before falling dead, until the island is quiet once more for no creature flies through its skies. Humans, however, are not untouched by the sound of the Summoning, which seems to have a peculiar behaviour linked to moon phases, making it even more unexpected:

Last night, it arrived along with a new moon. The result was something never seen before. The women of the island woke in their beds to a familiar, unwelcome sensation. Some feared their bladders had given way, until they rolled back the covers. Every single one had bled a river, a crimson Rorschach test on the sheets. It did not discriminate against age or fertility: pre-pubescent girls were among those reporting mass haemorrhaging. Even Veronica Doyle, the oldest woman on the island, coming up on ninety-five. Nell too woke to blood on her sheets. (Gleeson, 2024, p. 81).

Because of the Summoning, Nell, the artist, moves around Banshla with a deep sense of islandness in herself, creating a vortex, “thoughts of war. The Somme. Poppies” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 81). We read how she often wonders how to explain the island – the shore, the lighthouse, Rathglas, the old well, the carving of Danu – to the tourists she guides around during summer’s peak season. The Summoning, as the Iníons call it, the very voice of this disembodied body of land in the waters of the Irish Sea, is hard to explain to someone who does not hear it, even more so when men are driven to madness by it, birds die and fall from the sky. In the novel *Hagstone*, this is the voice of the island, as the locals started to call it. The Summoning is also one of the reasons the Iníons seem to keep everyone at bay in Rathglas, and minimise contact with the locals. Banshla is a fresh start for the Iníons, the commune of women living on the island who spontaneously decided to part ways with modern life and start anew. Gleeson very sharply uses the *topos* of the island to sew a conversation of new beginnings: even the place where the Iníons live, Rathglas, used to be an old convent near an ancient well said to have once been dedicated to St. Brigid. Now, the Iníons worship Danu, a water goddess. The fluidity of their life is marked by hours of long work, in a sort of ritual, a flow. They wake up with the sun, and start to tend the gardens, collect the weeds, and clean the place where they live, before sitting for a communal breakfast to be consumed in silence. Maman was the first Iníon in Rathglas, and soon many others will follow – looking for a place to forgive and forget, and be left in peace. The protagonist, Nell, finds their life

somewhat appealing; however, such a boxed existence would clash with her creative process. Nevertheless, her artist's life craves new, sublime experiences, as she accepts a proposal for a work to be performed in Rathglas at Samhain.

In *Hagstone*, we are silent witnesses to Nell's very own explanation of an artist's life: there is a birthing, carrying, and washing that the island shaped in her – or carved, wave after wave, like the carving of Danu. This resolution, this deep understanding of the island, happens on the shore, near the water, in the ultimate space that connects the woman to the artist inside her body: Kerri Ní Dochartaigh defines these as 'thin spaces' (Ní Dochartaigh, 2022) in her natural history of 'Celtic coastlines'. An afterthought, indeed, of reading *Hagstone* is that this is not the first time an epiphany has happened on the shore in Irish literature. Many Irish authors owe a debt to James Joyce, who defined the labyrinth of the mind of an Irish man of his age and time, and yet failed to identify 'the other half of the sky'. This means that while Joyce defined the Irish man, and the Irish artist, it took authors many more years to even attempt to explore the Irish woman, and further the Irish woman as an artist in the way Gleeson does in *Hagstone*. In an interview with Hilary White (2024) for *Tolka*, Gleeson notes that "There's only so much looking at the sea and the cliffs you can do." Part of the interview focuses on *Islanded*, a 2021 essay of Gleeson's, and Gleeson's creative process. In *Islanded* in particular, the author mentions James Joyce and how he "keenly felt a mysticism, Celtic or otherwise, that comes with the logistics, the location, the isolation of the people on these isles" (White, 2024). It is interesting to note how, to Gleeson, both Ireland and the Aran Islands, in the case of the interview for *Tolka*, are the same – an archipelagic concept that influences Irish authors. The island, one and multiple; alone in the sea and yet connected via watery routes. The island becomes an aesthetic, a dimension where at the same time Banshla and Rathglas exist within one another – the island within the island, and the island the Iníons built, a pagan haven where once stood a church. Isolation as a *locus*, and art as the logical structure to decode the island, both contribute to an experience that sits within the Irish mysticism felt by Joyce and his contemporary writers, and that was subsequently inherited by contemporary Irish writers.

The Portrait of the Artist in *Hagstone*

In this instance, we can propose *Hagstone* as a response to Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, originally published in 1916. John Paul Riquelme (2017) argues that Joyce's protagonist Stephen Dedalus "wants to become an artist and to be free" (p. 34). James Naremore (1976) suggests that Stephen only moves towards art to ward off reality. Both scholars underline the sense of escape sought by Joyce's protagonist. In other words, many scholars disagree with the depth of Stephen's artistic calling. But this is the portrait of a man. And yet again, the overlooked argument here is that it is no coincidence this calling happens, nonetheless, on the shore:

A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird... when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance of his gaze, without shame or wanton-ness. – Heavenly God! cried Stephen’s soul, in an outburst of profane joy. (Joyce, 2023, p. 176)

The call to art could not happen anywhere else. The shore, the invocation of God, an epiphany: the shore is, after all, the place where sea and land meet, a sublime space. Here we witness the struggle created by both waves and sand grains. 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 the connecting tissue between the island and the human being. In *Hagstone*, the shore is deeply linked to Nell’s art: it helps her clarify her thoughts when she swims, and it is part of her creative process when she searches for inspiration (and finds it). We read in *Hagstone*:

After the Iníon book is done, she will head back out here to Greenawn and research another new piece. The finale will involve burying herself. Covering each limb with shells and seaweed. Whatever flotsam the sea discards. An alarming amount of manmade waste washes up on the island and the piece will address that too. But ultimately it’s about death, but then art is always about death in the end. (Gleeson, 2024, p. 114)

Art is, yes, a means to reach freedom for Nell, but her art is not an escape from the island like it symbolises for Stephen Dedalus – on the contrary, as we read above “art is always about death in the end” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 114). In particular, Nell’s work for the Iníons is suspended in the months whose names divide the parts of the book – very much like in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the time of the novel is just suspended. And much like Joyce’s Stephen, we know very little of Nell as a physical woman – much more of her as a physical artist. We do not know her age, just as we know vaguely that Stephen Dedalus was 16 during a confession passage (Riquelme, 2017); we know of her desires – for freedom, for sunnier shores, for love – as we know of Stephen’s desires. The point where *Hagstone* becomes what I call the portrait of the artist ‘as a young woman’, the point of rupture, if we can describe it as such, is the realisation on one side for Stephen that his art can only be practiced overseas, and for Nell that her art is without any doubt linked to the island where she lives. Sheldon Brivic (2002) highlights how, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen’s goal “is to become an artist, but this goal has to be constructed retrospectively for the first three chapters. It does not exist as a goal until chapter 4, and

Stephen is far from reaching it at the end” (Brivic, 2002, p. 457). In *Hagstone*, Nell is an established artist who nevertheless rejects the establishment of a career ‘overseas’ in favour of the Summoning of the island, the damp of the anthracite-coloured rocks. Her art resides in the wilderness, as her work for the Iníons will show: bones, and cloths, and natural colours adorn the symbol of Maman’s Samhain, creating an item so unique... perfect to crown the body of a woman-chief.

That mysticism felt by Gleeson evolved in the utterly sublime horror of the Iníons, and the relationship they establish with Nell: “an outsider encountering a cult in an insular community” to still use the words from the *Tolka* interview (White, 2024). In the light of the shore’s epiphany, of both Nell and Stephen, we can advance the idea that Gleeson looks at Joyce with an ambivalent sight: on one hand, the mysticism caused by the isolation of the island is intriguing – the perfect environment to explore the human (a man’s?) mind; on the other hand, the author takes the chance to challenge what Christine Van Boheeman (1989) described as Joyce’s dispossession of the feminine – women as *mise en abyme* of Joyce’s own style.

The connections between *Hagstone* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* here are multiple, refracting, tidal. Tidal is also the choice of the shore in Joyce, and by extension, the shore of the central revelation at the end of the novel *Hagstone*: there is something intrinsically Irish in the choice of both locations. As a way to reinforce the idea of an epiphany as a fleeting moment, we have a woman standing on the shore: a point on an island that is continuously challenged by high and low tide. We can argue that Joyce deliberately chose that particular location as the setting for an epiphany, not merely for its physical qualities, but to underscore the singularity and irreproducibility of the moment. Because of the tide, the girl who stood midstream must move at some stage (another hint of even a potential timeframe for this well-known, literary epiphany). The choice of a woman on the shore, in contrast with the female protagonist of *Hagstone*, also forces further analysis. While in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* the woman is the object of the epiphany (one could argue women are objects of a man’s gaze in general in Joyce), in *Hagstone* this view is challenged and eventually overturned: it is a woman, a true artist, who overlooks the shore and realises her art is laid bare on the sand of the island. Gleeson rejects Joyce’s idea of impersonality, of an ‘invisible artist’ such as the one Stephen aspires to be in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. On the contrary, she puts a woman at the centre of the story and of the art: Nell’s lived experience challenges Stephen’s abstractions, in a power play where corporality and emotion stand in contrast with invisibility (of the artist) and linearity. So on one hand, we have Gleeson, the author, challenging the idea of writing of an island, on an island, for art’s sake. And on the other hand, we have Nell the artist: “A hagstone – I have a thing for them! ... If you look through the hole, you’re meant to see a different view of the world. I think that’s why I collect them. Looking, seeing, an artist thing” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 87).

Of Iníons and hagstones

“Nell has her own names for these rocks – words for water or weather – in the native language” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 56). Wilderness contributes to her art, and at the same time, the island becomes an integral part of the act of producing art, in a meta-practice. This link between art and islandness happens in the novel on the shores, near the sea, in that strand of land just before the sand meets the ocean. This fluid, liminal space has also been at the centre of epiphanies in the more recent novels of, for example, John Boyne (*Water*, 2023), John Banville (*The Sea*, 2005), Colm Tóibín (*The Blackwater Lightship*, 1999). Banshla is a fresh start for the Iníons, a commune of women living on the island who spontaneously decided to part ways with modern life and start anew. Gleeson very sharply uses the *topos* of the island to develop a sublime myth of new beginnings: for Nell, as her art is somewhat longing for something new at the moment the novel starts; for the Iníons, as their preparation for Samhain symbolises the start of a new cycle, and yet towards the end of the novel, something much, much more definitive. The Iníons live in Rathglas, an old convent near an old well said to be once dedicated to St. Brigid: here “the air and trees are still, but below, the sea makes its presence known” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 45). They worship Danu, a figure of Irish mythology of whom we know very little today. In *Hagstone*, Danu seems a protective goddess to the Iníons; however, her stele in the waters of a hidden cove in Banshla deeply perturbed Nell and some of the Daughters. The stone column is hidden by the high tide yet appears around the time of Samhain, when waters are low, in all her ferocious glory. History goes that witches used to be tied there, to be slowly and painfully taken away by the tide.

Life at Rathglas follows the iron leadership of Maman, an older Iníon, founder of the movement that welcomes women in search of peace from the outside world – and yet constrains them within the walls of the former convent. An Iníon day starts at dawn, with meditations and labour. Work is divided fairly, and according to skills: green thumbs take care of the garden, and the apiary (ironic, another community of females, and another symbol of ancient goddesses); foodies are in charge of the kitchen, which involves taking tough decisions during the winter months; others make sure Rathglas is tidy and well maintained, and some lead the evening discussions where the Daughters are allowed to exchange thoughts out of the daily silence that comes with their chores. It is a humble life that helps some and yet hides a darker secret. Some of them, like Muireann, keep secrets and must come to terms with the life they chose: the Iníon who will become Nell’s friend and confidante collects objects discarded by the waves – mermaid’s purses, and hagstones to keep evil at bay. The shore is a space that hides treasures, and then, a safe space. This is, however, obscured in *Hagstone* by the sense of claustrophobia that permeates the island. However, Gleeson evokes a c(h)oral narration of the events that sees Nell, the protagonist, at the centre of a situation that will develop on the island of the Iníons – the commune of women inhabiting this place made of sand, cliffs, driftwood, and rocks.

‘C(h)oral’ because we are near the coast, most of the action takes place on the beach, shore, or cliff, and yet even if the narrator follows one protagonist throughout the novel, the Iníons make their presence well known to Nell: they co-construct the space of the shore she will embody through her art.

On this island, people peacefully live their lives drifting through the seasons. Each and every islander is a Jack of all trades, juggling the crumbling economy, the harsh weather, and the tourists that each summer wash ashore with the local ferries. What tourists cannot fathom is the ‘Summoning’: a sound bubbling from the very core of the island, causing emotional and physical distress to whoever sets foot on the island’s shores. Nell and the Iníons, though, are able to understand the Summoning in a unique way thanks to their collision with each other. Gleeson’s novel is multisensorial, a feeling created by the use of the language: “Treading water, isobars of cold around limbs” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 9); “the waves are white tulle” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 7), and the pace of the narration – “One last dive. Duck down, lung suck. The burble-burble in ears. Exhale and wait. The contractions of drowning” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 9). It leaves the reader with an immersing-and-immersive feeling, which sits just right in the context of island studies, and thinking with the island (Pugh, 2013). While drowning here is represented as a feeling *in fieri*, potential and yet suffocating, there are extensive studies done by island studies scholars on the history of drowning in island settings; and drowned bodies and their relationship with power dynamics between islands and mainlands (Stratford, 2025; Stratford & Murray, 2018).

Melody Jue (2020), in her book *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through seawater*, highlights how, instead of seeing the ocean as a decodable, determined structure, we should start thinking of it as a dynamic, active location whose characteristics manifest within it and through mediated forms of contact. Sinéad Gleeson approaches the island of the Iníons, where the cliff of Banshla is a balustrade of shale, from the ocean, where waves froth the shore: water is at the same time a border and integral part of the life of the islanders, who see it as a protective milieu against the nosiness of tourists. Also in *Hagstone*, the body of the island is the body of a woman; it has hills like bones that Nell knows as her own. And as from a story from an old myth, Nell is invited by the Iníons to celebrate their island-centric culture, and commissioned to deliver a piece of art that would honour their history and legacy. The novel has many themes and motifs that resonate with islandness: it is set on an island, the protagonist is an islander, and her feelings are portrayed in keen detail across the story – a literary representation of islandness, if only Irish. We go through her perceptions of what the island physically is – “The town has a predictable axis of buildings: a shop, a church, one pub” (Gleeson, 2024, p. 12) – and what it is metaphorically (‘adrift’ is a recurring word to describe both the island as a space and Nell as an individual). We observe the relationship with the coast, the cliff, the shore, and the objects that nature leaves for humans to keep and reflect on (driftwood and scraps of net, or mermaid’s purses, or

hagstones to be exchanged in secret). We read about the loneliness and the intimate connection between Nell's art and islandness, when she explains how she has associated her art with the island for so long that she feels doomed to make the same version of the same thing; and at the same time her wish to never leave the coast, to be secluded from the loud noise of life – "Nell both loathes and loves cities ..., a kind of chaos she is sometimes in the mood for" (Gleeson, 2024, p. 14). Nell had to compromise, to live where her art belongs, in-between sea and land:

Last year she'd been offered a residency in a warm country. It included accommodation in a villa, a pool, horses in a nearby paddock. The photos online showed a large mahogany desk overlooking a valley. A lemon tree outside the window. It was funded by a philanthropic family linked to greenwashing, so Nell turned it down. Whenever she allowed herself to think of it, it wasn't the art unmade, but that lemon tree, and the view, the absence of damp rocks and wind. (Gleeson, 2024, p. 15).

In this passage, we see the stark difference in Nell's perception of the island and the mainland: the island is seen as damp and windy in the last sentence, while the warm country has a villa immersed in the sun, in a valley. The lemon tree is iconic of the Mediterranean coast, its fruits as colourful as the sun. The parallel between the lemon and the hagstone here almost draws itself – a sunny coast bearing fruits, when the damp rocks only give back more rocks. Gleeson willingly leaves the 'warm country' generic, undefined – we know lemon trees grow on the mainland as well as islands. She could be speaking of somewhere on the coasts of the Italian Peninsula, but also of an island such as Capri, covered in lemon tree forests. It is a choice, to leave this information out of Nell's memories: it is not the physical art unmade that she longs for, but that "lemon tree, and the view" – in a strife, a need to experience something different from "damp rocks and wind"; and yet the impossibility of it.

Nell and the Iníons are itinerants; they have travelled from island to island, and have found peace and a sense of home in:

The kind of place survivors of a shipwreck wash up. Catching fish, chasing crabs with cupped hands. Cooking at night by fire, a gold shadow on the sand. Everything black beyond a couple of metres. But the sea would be out there, the sound of the waves dancing in and out. Insects clicking in the trees, her salted mouth sucking the cooked fish from the bone. (Gleeson, 2024, pp. 7–8)

This leakage, the image of the shipwreck, creates a lemniscate where past and present, facts and fantasies, get more blurry. The passage above is all in Nell's head: she was never shipwrecked, she never went around the beach chasing crabs with her bare hands, nor did she eat cooked, sucking fish to

the bone. And yet, both Nell and the Iníons live on the island in a space that is at the border between reality and dreams, the very exact space where the ocean meets the sand: the shore. Once again, the shore becomes the space of the action, where everything happens: it is not just liminal, it is not hidden, except to tourists. Gleeson distributes pebbles and pearls of Island studies all over *Hagstone*, to follow like a rosary: through the Iníons, she sings the ‘litany of islands, the rosary of archipelagos’ that Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2001) suggested to follow in island studies.

Conclusions

To those not familiar with the Irish coast, the hagstone is a peculiar stone washed over shores, characterised by a porosity that gives place to an emptiness in the middle of it. The shore is a space that shapes and hides treasures, and then, a safe space. The porosity of the stone serves here as a metaphor for something more: on Banshla, leakages do happen, starting with the Iníons, whose invitation shakes the very core of the island – from the Summoning to the tidal will of Danu. Both Nell and the Iníons live on the island in a space that is at the border between reality and dreams. In the novel, the shore increasingly becomes the space of the art, the action, where both art and life happen: it is not just liminal, it is not hidden. It is a space in the wilderness where Nell develops her art, and where islandness becomes increasingly part of her installations. Nell’s link with islandness gives birth to a rather radical sensibility: this relationship towards the island and its islandness, and the art produced on it, encompasses every aspect of Banshla. It helps reframe the concept of islandness as based on connections and constellations. The island of *Hagstone* is a frontier for both art and islandness – with its never-ending Summoning whispered to humankind, more resounding than the waves, where art is the last frontier: where art is all that is left, and at the same time all there is.

In *Hagstone*, the island manifests features of islandness through collusions with art: relationships that drift between woman and art, and art and the island. Multiple connections, drawn together by an aesthetic moment capable of birthing epiphanies. The novel demonstrates that through art connections can happen – they in fact create a stream to follow to further understand how creative practices contribute to a more nuanced understanding of islandness within the island as a literary *topos*. Such a meta-experiment looks at the art made on the island (the text) by an artist (the author) with an artist as a protagonist and the delivery of a piece of art as the apex of the narration. This exercise pushes the boundaries of the known relationship between art and islandness, looking at writing practices, and this is what this article wanted to explore: how an Irish author such as Gleeson manages to create art *on* the island, *for* the island, *about* the island and, finally, *with* the island.



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