

# The Nurturing River in Nuala Ní Chonchúir's *You*: An Ecocritical Reading

El río que nutre en la novela *You*, de Nuala Ní Chonchúir: Una lectura ecocrítica

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**Abstract:** Arguing that critical approaches to urban literature have often undermined the role of rivers, the present analysis will look at the emotional power that the river Liffey brings about in Nuala Ní Chonchúir's debut novel *You* (2010). Informed by ecocritical theory, the discussion will tackle issues connected to the effects of urban and semi-urban habitats on the shaping of the individual mind, in a way that will challenge the traditional divide between city and countryside. It will consequently contend that the protagonist's perception and relation to the places she inhabits can be explained in terms of the notions of topophilia and ecophobia, with the sole purpose of subverting them. The analysis will finally suggest that the comforting sound of whirls, the lulling effect of the current of the river, is the nurturing element that stands between the laws of nature and those of society, blending life with death and allowing the possibility for rebirth.

**Keywords:** ecosystem; topophilia; ecophobia; rivers; Nuala Ní Chonchúir; *You*.

**Summary:** Introduction. Ecocriticism. Nuala Ní Chonchúir's *You*. The House by the River. The Urban House. The River of Life and Death. Conclusions.

**Resumen:** A partir de la idea de que el acercamiento crítico a la literatura urbana ha tendido a ignorar el papel que juegan los ríos, este estudio trata de analizar el poder emocional que adopta el río Liffey en la primera novela de Nuala Ní Chonchúir, *You* (2010). Siguiendo postulados de ecocrítica, el presente análisis ahonda en temas relacionados con el efecto que tienen los hábitats urbanos y semiurbanos en la formación del pensamiento individual, cuestionando la división tradicional entre el campo y la ciudad. De esta forma, defiende que la percepción de la protagonista y la relación que mantiene con los lugares que habita pueden explicarse a partir de los conceptos de topofilia y ecofobia, con el fin de subvertirlos. Finalmente el análisis sugiere que el sonido arrullador de la cascada de agua y el efecto de la corriente del río son los elementos que, al disolver las leyes naturales y las sociales, nutren la fusión entre la vida y la muerte posibilitando así el renacer.

**Palabras clave:** ecosistema; topofilia; ecofobia; ríos; Nuala Ní Chonchúir; *You*.



**Sumario:** Introducción. Ecocrítica. La novela *You*, de Nuala Ní Chonchúir. La casa del río. La casa urbana. El río de la vida y la muerte. Conclusiones.

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Water, is taught by thirst, Land—by oceans crossed.  
(Emily Dickinson)

She asked that it be named for her.  
The river took its name from the land,  
The land took its name from a woman.  
(Eavan Boland)

## INTRODUCTION

The struggle to delimit space has formed part of the essence of human action for centuries. Whereas such territorial instinct has suited the needs of peoples to erect geopolitical frontiers (sometimes respecting natural laws and many others transgressing and violating boundaries), nature demarcates territories relying on geographical reliefs such as mountains, forests, valleys, oceans, lakes and the course of rivers. The ancient Greeks believed that matter was constituted by four basic elements: fire, earth, air and water were prime composites from which everything else originated. In the case of water, the cultural imaginary has historically invested it with qualities associated to life, birth, baptism, fertility or renewal. Thus, in Medieval times, fountains or streams of water were indispensable components of the *locus amoenus*, the idyllic place where lovers met. Since then, it has entered the literary imagination in multifarious ways, sometimes to oppose the idealised and romantic visions of the goodness of the countryside to the less benign forces of city life, as it used to be the case in the pastoral tradition.<sup>1</sup> If water is a vital resource for any ecosystem, being indispensable for the earth life cycle, it has also become a distinct element of literature, with a

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<sup>1</sup> *Amoenus* comes from the Latin and it means pleasant, delightful or lovely. In Medieval literature, *locus amoenus* was a concept that evoked a beautiful, blissful and sublime realm that contained essential but basic elements, such as trees, grass, flowers or a prairie, the sound of birds, a breeze and a water fountain (Flores Santamaría 65–80).

conspicuous occurrence often evoking the endless flow of life, the fluidity of movement and its cleansing, renewal potential.

Even though ecocritical and ecofeminist approaches to literature have proliferated in the last decades, critical attention has tended to focus more intently on either urban and cultural spaces, or on natural landscapes, often from a dichotomous perspective, whereas thorough studies on the basic elements of nature and its influence on the shaping of human emotions and consciousness have been scarce.<sup>2</sup> Alison Lacivita has noted in this regard that the over stress on cities as self-contained organisms has undermined the exploration of the interrelation between urban and non-urban places, such as canals, sidewalks, riverbanks or gardens, since these “transitional ecological spaces straddle the boundaries between culture and nature” (28). It is within this theoretical framework that I wish to place the present analysis of Irish writer Nuala Ní Chonchúir's debut novel *You* (2010). Narrated in the second person by a ten-year-old girl, the novel explores her emotional endurance, as she has to navigate between two conflicting spaces, in a way that proves to be as intimate as it is unsentimental. While her mother's dysfunctional household will only partially meet her needs in the wilderness of a hospitable nature, her father's urban enclosed space will prove problematic for the girl's growing up process. Taking *You* as a coming-of-age novel, this essay will explore the function of the river as a nurturing force that stands between the laws of nature and those of society, in what appears to the reader as a balanced organic order that will pose its threats in the course of the narration. I will contend that the protagonist's relationship with her surroundings can be explained by means of applying ecocritical principles based on the concepts of topophilia and ecophobia, which focus on how human beings ascribe values to their environment at the same time that they are affected by their own perception of it.

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<sup>2</sup> A recent exception could be T. S. McMillin's monograph, *The Meaning of Rivers* (2011), which focuses on North American literature. Within the context of Irish studies, it should be noted that two International Conferences of IASIL (in Leuven, 2011, and Cork, 2016), included panels dealing with the presence of water imagery in Irish poetry: in the first case, “Water Voices: The Imagination of Water in Contemporary Irish Poetry”; and “Archipelagic Ireland,” in the second, which explored the growing importance conferred to sea and oceans, and further discussed the upsurge of a new moment, the “Blue humanities,” interested in the effects of water on culture.

## 1. ECOCRITICISM

The study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment has been largely approached since the early 1990s from ecocritical standpoints: a theoretical framework also transfigured into its related fields of green studies, bioregionalism, ecopoetics, environmental criticism, ecofeminism, literary ecology or the more recent blue humanities.<sup>3</sup> In its cultural practice, it has meant the adoption of an ethical position toward the environment and the relationship between human beings and nature. In the context of the present discussion, one needs to start claiming that, although the search for a sense of place is ingrained in Irish literature (as centuries of colonisation wiped away a culture of their own), ecocriticism has only recently started to produce fruitful studies that go beyond the exploration of Ireland's rural past, or its pre-colonial nationalist agenda to recover lost traditions against the effects of imperialistic modernisation.<sup>4</sup>

In her article on Ireland's environmental policies, Lacivita denounces its noticeably low performance when seen in relation to other European countries, arguing that:

Ireland's landscape has often been used as a political tool (in terms of colonialism, tourism and nationalism) and, when compared to the realities of Irish life and to the priorities of the Irish Free State, this

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<sup>3</sup> See Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (xv-xxxvii), for a survey on the birth and growth of ecocriticism and its variations; William Howarth (78), for his stress on the bond between the sciences and the humanities; and Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace for the expansion of the boundaries of ecocriticism. In spite of its short history, in comparison to other disciplines, ecocriticism has undergone such methodological and structural divergences that Scott Slovic has already identified three phases in its evolution: first-wave ecocritics, who mainly focused on the imagery of nature that emerged from the literary texts; second-wave critics, who added a theoretical framework and a more sophisticated terminology to accommodate emerging perspectives in an interdisciplinary area; and third-wave critics, who have included post-ethnic and post-national issues, as well as global concepts of place (4–7).

<sup>4</sup> In the year 2000 Gerry Smyth claimed that “Irish Studies and ecocriticism will have a lot to say to each other, insofar as many of the issues currently occupying the latter have been part of the former's traditional remit, albeit in other forms and guises. Geographical peculiarity and historical discontinuity have produced a situation in Ireland in which questions concerning space, landscape, locality, gender, urban and rural experience and nature, have become central to both the cultural and the critical imagination” (164).

creates an enduring 'country versus city' divide in Irish culture that contributes to the current poor environmental record within the country. (27)<sup>5</sup>

In this like vein, Tim Wenzell has also contended that:

Given the urgency of Ireland's environmental status, and the longstanding construction of Ireland as a uniquely 'green' place, one might expect an environmental sensibility to be a feature of Irish literary studies. But the analysis of Ireland's most prominent writers has rarely focused on their observations of the natural world. ("Ecocriticism" 126)

Greg Garrard has added that ecocriticism in Ireland has made "little headway within Irish studies" with "few and scattered" publications that ignored the few previous works and confused terms, such as the equation place, landscape and ecology (108). However, Derek Gladwin has corrected such views, appending that "regardless of the low output of ecocriticism within the context of Ireland in comparison to North America, or even in the UK, the momentum is building in Irish studies" (327).<sup>6</sup> It is within this framework where Ní Chonchúir's novel *You* can best be placed, in its privileging life close to nature against the modernising ethos of the city, all the while picturing a less benign river with a magnetising power. The contention held throughout this discussion is that the emotional states undergone by the protagonist, as they are revealed in the course of the narration, are relentlessly influenced by the places she inhabits, be it the semi-urban environment of her house by the banks of the river, or her father's apartment, in the densely urbanised and noisy suburbs of Dublin.

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<sup>5</sup> This argument is shared by Finbarr Bradley and James J. Kennelly, who affirm that "the relationship between the Irish, their sense of place and the natural world is unhealthily reflected in the country's perspective on resource use and its weak performance on a range of environmental issues such as biodiversity, waste management and material utilization," adding that the challenge in postmodern Ireland should be to accommodate humanity to nature (6).

<sup>6</sup> Ecocritical readings of Irish literature have turned into a growing field of research with titles such as: Oona Frawley's *Irish Pastoral*; Tim Wenzell's *Emerald Green*; Christine Cusick's *Out of the Earth*; Eamonn Wall's *Writing the Irish West*; or the most recent, Donna L. Potts' *Contemporary Irish Writing and Environmentalism*.

## 2. NUALA NÍ CHONCHÚIR'S *YOU*

Nuala Ní Chonchúir, who also writes under the name of Nuala O'Connor (mainly in North America), is an award-winning writer, whose versatile literary production includes poetry, short stories and novels, and also advocates flash fiction.<sup>7</sup> With a bilingual education, in English and Irish, language is what prompted her to write: "I came to writing through language" and "I came to short fiction through poetry" ("Pathways" 131) are two of the most recurrent quotes that best define her approach to literature. Her first novel, *You* (2010), narrated entirely in the second-person voice and classified as a novella, was well received by critics and general readers alike. However, the appraisal was placed, almost exclusively, on its experimental and original form, rather than on other current issues addressed (Hogan; Leonard; Wallace; White).<sup>8</sup> In fact, the complexity of *You* does not lie exclusively on its innovative technique since urgent themes, such as the mother-daughter relationship,<sup>9</sup> family rearrangements after divorce, the female rite of passage or the effects of milieus on individuals, have been critically overlooked. Therefore, the present analysis will look at the symbolic meaning of the places the protagonist inhabits and, more specifically, at the influence of the river in the development of her emotional well-being.

Inspired by the author's own childhood diaries and particularly by the place where her family built their home in Palmerstown (Dublin),<sup>10</sup> the story is seen from the perspective of a little girl, whose musings on the adult world elude childhood. The title takes its name from the narrative voice addressed, that of the implied reader evoked in the text in

<sup>7</sup> See her own web page *Nuala O'Connor*.

<sup>8</sup> Yvonne Hogan described the second-person voice "compelling" (2010); Arminta Wallace emphasised its "great potential for awkwardness" contending that it was "one of the trickiest variations of narrative technique" (2010); and Hilary White added that the device is "less irritant than it sounds, and comes to flow as steadily as the oft-mentioned river . . . it allows deeply intimate episodes and feelings to migrate swiftly to the heart of the beholder" (2011).

<sup>9</sup> I have elsewhere analysed *You* as a dysfunctional family narrative, comparing it to Clare Keegan's novella *Foster*, also focalised on a child narrator and published the same year ("Portraits" 67–76).

<sup>10</sup> In fact, she has affirmed that "[t]he narrator in *YOU* is a version of the 10-year-old me: she is a bookish, dreamy, analytical, inward looking child—very internal in her approach to life—but sharp in her own way. She's sensitive and crabby. That is the child that I was" ("Choosing *YOU*").

the form of a “you,” while the protagonist remains nameless throughout the story.<sup>11</sup> Even though such narratological device could initially invest the account with a universal quality,<sup>12</sup> the peculiarities of the child’s upbringing soon uproot her in an environment that determines the shaping of her consciousness. *You* delves into the troubled daily life of a single-parent family ruled (largely misruled) by an emotionally fragile mother of three children (of two different fathers), and the no easier life of her father’s frenzied household in town, who has recently started a new family, he has another child and yet one more to come shortly, “another half-brother or sister to add to the list” (Ní Chonchúir, *You* 19).<sup>13</sup> While her mother’s house by the river offers the protagonist the freedom of the countryside, her father lives in a small apartment located in an urban environment that, in the eyes of the girl, is suffocating and both physically and emotionally far away. Although it is never stated in the text, references to Kate Bush, the Olympics in Moscow, the film *The Elephant Man* and Nadia Comaneci set the novel in the Ireland of the 1980s. This was a significant decade for the nation’s modernisation, which had transformed its rural economy and way of life to a more urban, secular, prosperous and global one. In the novel, the changes effected by the ethos of a more liberal Ireland eventually contrast with the enduring movements of nature that go beyond human comprehension. In between the two sites, the powerful force of the often-personified Liffey lies; a river whose whirls soothe the child to sleep at night. In both its permanence, as a phenomenon of nature, and its unremitting change, the river will trigger the girl’s eventual growth, once she is able to reconcile its potential danger with its nurturing quality.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The author has noted that the perspective of the second-person voice contributed to build empathy in the reader. In her own words: the “second person comes easily to me, I find it a very natural way to tell a story, a very Irish way, which has a lot to do with the fact that it is both intimate and at a remove. The narrator is at a small distance but uses the cajoling, close voice of a confidante. It is like a voice in your ear, which is how all good fiction should be” (“Choosing *YOU*”).

<sup>12</sup> She hides her name in her own narrative explaining that it is an Irish one, difficult to pronounce. Curiously, the author herself also uses the Anglicised version of her own, arguing that she finds annoying that people cannot pronounce it properly, causing the effect of “a mental block” (Holmquist).

<sup>13</sup> Further references will be to the same edition and are included in the text between brackets.

<sup>14</sup> The author had also played around with the symbolism of the river and water imagery in her first collection of short stories *The Wind Across the Grass* (2004).

### 3. THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER

In his classic ecocritical monograph *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between place and space, explaining that: “Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other . . . Space and place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted” (*Space* 3). James M. Cahalan adds to this that: “Space is territory that has little or no meaning to a person . . . , whereas place consists of space that a person or a group of people has invested with meaning. But place and home are not always positive” (258). Certainly, these two concepts clearly underline how much the protagonist of *You* is divided by two homes, two families and two environments in which neither place nor space can be experienced to their utmost. Challenging the all-too-easy binary country *vs* city life, the protagonist’s apparent over kinship with nature discloses a hidden truth: that she is ill-fitted in the two dysfunctional homes she has to inhabit. Pictured as a sensible and extremely sensitive child, she occupies a space in between the two houses. None of them are, however, “her place,” which is indeed embodied by the river. Although this house is built in what has been defined as an open ecosystem, with houses displayed horizontally, where everybody knows one another as much as their milieu and where she has free space and freedom, her emotional wellbeing is no better than when she moves to the city. The distinction between open and closed spaces has been developed by Tuan, in the context of the definition of the term, arguing that: “Open space signifies freedom, the promise of adventure, light, the public realm, formal and unchanging beauty; enclosed space signifies the cozy security of the womb, privacy, darkness, biologic life” (*Topophilia* 27–28). As I intend to prove throughout this discussion, the reversal will be the case in *You*, a novel that destabilises static and monolithic definitions of place and space, and further locates the river at the foreground.

Ní Chonchúir has explained that the setting of this house was modelled after her own one in Palmerston (although the real name is never mentioned in the novel) and that the river was an inseparable element of her environment. Though children often used to go there to play, they were constantly warned against its danger by parents, and there were stories circulating about people being drowned (Morales-Ladrón, “I write” 134). This river is the Liffey, which divides the city of Dublin, whose name in Irish, “Baile Atha Cliath,” means “ford of the hurdles”



(the place where the river can be crossed). Likewise, Liffey, “An Life” in Irish, has come to symbolise life, movement and fluidity.<sup>15</sup> These connections did not pass unnoticed to the most iconic Irish author James Joyce, who personified the river in *Ulysses* (especially in the “Hades” episode) and moreover opened *Finnegans Wake* with the word “riverrun,” immortalising the Liffey and transforming its flow into Anna Livia Plurabelle’s hair.<sup>16</sup> Although Joyce mainly focused on urban life in his writings, his friend Eugène Jolas has explained that he attached a deep meaning to rivers and mountains, which he considered “phenomena that will remain when all the peoples and their governments will have vanished,” and contended that the river, the mountains and time were the true heroes of *Finnegans Wake* (10–13). Specifically, the section devoted to “Anna Livia Plurabelle” was, according to the author, an attempt to subordinate words to the rhythm of water, representing

a chattering dialogue across the river by two washer women who, as night falls, become a tree and a stone. The river is named Anna Liffey. Some of the words at the beginning are hybrid Danish-English. Dublin is a city founded by Vikings. The Irish name is Baile Atha Cliath. Ballyclee = Town or Ford of Hurdles. Her Pandora's box contains the ills flesh is heir to. The stream is quite brown, rich in salmon, very devious, shallow. The splitting up towards the end (seven dams) is the city abuilding. (Ellmann 563–64)

Interestingly, Joyce’s rendering of this natural element in his writings does not differ so much from the position adopted by bioregionalism, which Cahalan defines as “the belief that lands are best demarcated not by state and national borders, but by rivers and mountains and other parts

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<sup>15</sup> The Liffey has also been known as Anna Liffey, which is the Anglicised version of “Abhainn na Life,” meaning River Liffey, and *An Ruirthech*, which means “fast (or strong) runner” (Warner).

<sup>16</sup> An instance of how the river is humanised takes place when Anna Livia prepares for seduction: “First she let her hair fal and sown it flussed to her feet its teviots winding coils. Then, mothernaked, she sampood herself with galawater and fragrant pistania mud, wupper and lauar, from crown to sole . . . . And after that she wove a garland for her hair. She pleated it. She plaited it. Of meadowgrass and riverflags, the bulrush and waterweed, and of fallen griefs of weeping willow” (206–70). One should also refer here to Eavan Boland’s famous revision of Joyce’s invocation of the river in her poem “Anna Liffey,” which opens this article. For an insightful comparative reading of Joyce and Boland, which explores the appropriation of the river as a metaphor for the woman, see Dinsman, also Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin.

of the natural world, and that we should live and take action based on this principle” (255). In a similar vein, in *You*, the river is more than a geographical marker. Its omnipresence, personified by the protagonist in the watery imagery that permeates her narration, turns it into a character with a will of its own. Therefore, the child’s sense of belonging is intensely attached to the house built in the banks of the river, a place where she finds herself in communion with nature. Lacking a nurturing mother and a protective household, she makes the river her “home.” In her own words:

The way you hear the river, as it flows past your house all day and all night, is somewhere in the back of your head . . . . The river is like a secret. You own it, and you know all about the dead animals it carries, the ducks and swans and sticks and scurf that float on it. You love looking out at the water and you think that you live in the best house in the world . . . It’s the most special one because it’s built right on the river; nearly in it. (85)

With a mother who drinks heavily, has a history of failed relationships, has gone through several mental breakdowns, has attempted suicide and continuously shouts at the children, “so much that you could see frothy bits at the side of her mouth” (3), the ten-year-old protagonist is forced to take on the role of a little mother substitute.<sup>17</sup> Called “little Miss Prim” (38) by her own mother, who sees little in her, except clumsiness and inappropriate behaviour, the responsibilities that involve minding the baby and doing the house chores are too much for her:

Then you are stuck minding the baby and can’t go out to hang around with Gwen, who’ll be leaving any day now. The baby doesn’t want to do anything you want to do and he cries until his whole face is full of snots and he’s all sweaty and hot. Sometimes you feel sorry for him, but other times you just think he’s a pain. (14)

Self-awareness makes her sense that her childhood is unusual. Not only has she a brother and half-baby brother at her mother’s and two

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<sup>17</sup> The author has explained that the novel originated from her short story, “Anything Stranger or Startling,” included in her first collection *The Wind Across the Grass*, as she wanted to write further on the story of the girl who acts as the little mother to the family (Morales-Ladrón, “I Write” 131).

other half-sisters at her father's, she has negligent parents ignorant of the basic emotional needs of their children. At one point in the novel, she wishes that her mother were dead, so that they would be taken to an orphanage and eventually adopted by a rich family. Even though she lives in a communal society, she is also othered by the families of her neighbourhood; they do not allow their children to go to her chaotic house, ruled by a mother who has been in a "loony bin" (23). Her alienation from family and friends is more than apparent:

Some of the kids from the street are playing around outside when you come out into the sunshine. They all stop what they are doing and stand and gawk at you. You know every single one of them, but only one girl says hello. You say hello back, but you feel like you're from another planet now and that they're right to stare at you. Your da guides you and Liam onto the path that leads to Cora's house. The river sighs behind you. (129)

Cut off from such an unwelcoming community, the girl projects her own quest for happiness and peace of mind on the river. Listening to the calming effect of the noises of the whirls and the current of the river, she is soothed and comforted. In such *locus amoenus* or, in Tuan's terms, with such mimetic relationship with nature, this milieu could represent the perfect example of topophilia. However, the lack of a real warm and protective household leads her imagination to escape to other places wishing she could be somebody else. By the end of the novel, hoping to find an alternative to her family life, she runs away from home with her brother Liam and takes a ship all by herself to Wales, where her friend Gwen has just moved.

#### 4. THE URBAN HOUSE

In visible contrast to the house by the river, the protagonist's father lives in a corporation flat in town, a place in which the high density of people is inversely proportional to their occasional interaction. This vertically-built landscape, a sign of modernity, represents the commodification of a space that has been constructed in response to the demands of a growing population estranged from one another and from an environment with which they cannot relate. As Tuan has explained: "A world feels spacious and friendly when it accommodates our desires, and cramped when it frustrates them" (*Space* 65). In fact, she is shocked by the

violence of the children in the streets, who spill her milk and threaten her. Accordingly, the unsafe streets, the violence of the kids, the small size of the apartment and the incessant loud noises of the airplanes are perceived as toxic by the protagonist. The harmful effect of noise has been highlighted by acoustic ecologists, contending that not only the spaces we inhabit but also the sounds of the environment affect humankind, even though, as Tuan explains, the world of sound is not as spatially structured as the visual world (*Space* 14). However, the distress is so effective that the girl is well aware of the missing soothing noises of nature and of the impact of the environment on her emotional well-being. Just as the spaces we inhabit mould us, in positive and negative ways, Tuan has explained that from an early age a child is already

capable of conceptualizing space in its different dimensions; he appreciates subtleties in color and recognizes harmonies of line and volume. He has much of the adult's conceptual ability. He can see the landscape as a segment of artfully arranged reality "out there," but he also knows it as an enveloping, penetrating presence, a force. Unburdened by worldly cares, unfettered by learning, free of ingrained habit, negligent of time, the child is open to the world. (*Topophilia* 56)

In this vein, the protagonist's description of her father's home is symptomatic, focalising not so much on the geographical and physical idiosyncrasies of this urban setting but on what it lacks: a river. Tuan's definition of topophilia as "a neologism, useful in that it can be defined broadly to include all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment" (*Topophilia* 93), perfectly explains the relationship that the girl maintains with the places she inhabits. For that reason, the writer has commented how in *You* she intended to feature that, for a girl who lives close to nature and to a river, adapting to concrete and high-rise towers is frightening:

You do not understand those really stark urban landscapes. When I was a child I thought there would be nothing, I thought it would be hell to live in one of these, and that's what she feels like, that this is actually hell. She can't hear anything except airplanes going quite close because the airport is nearby. Everything is grey and everything is different. Even the rain is different. (Morales-Ladrón, "I Write" 131)

When the protagonist is rehomed to her father's after her mother has been dispatched to the mental hospital again, she acknowledges how much she misses her river:

There's something bigger missing as well and it took you a while to realize that it's the sound of the river. Your da's flat is high up and, apart from the airplanes passing over, all you can hear are muffled traffic noises and the people in the other flats moving around. You can hear their lights switches and their hoovers and their tellies and their shouting. But there are no sounds of nature: no river, no rusty trees, no far-off cow mooing, and definitely no birds singing. The noises that you hear in the flat are so wrong to your ears that they make you feel closed in and afraid. (125)

Apart from the absence of a river, the girl's alienation in town, in an oppressive environment where neither her father nor his new partner empathise with her, can be explained relying again on Tuan's conceptualisation of the opposite of topophilia, on what other ecocritics have termed ecophobia: "'Home' is a meaningless word apart from 'journey' and 'foreign country'; . . . the virtues of the countryside require their anti-image, the city, for the sharpening of focus, and vice versa" (*Topophilia* 102). Furthermore, in the contextualisation of the traditional contrast between city and country life in Irish literature, Gerry Smyth has invoked its universality, maintaining that it has been an inseparable part of the development of any society:

As well as generating novel modes of sociability, the growth of the suburbs necessitated the reconstitution of the traditional dualistic urban imagination . . . the suburbs became linked with many of the characteristics of traditional urban counter-pastoralism –alienation, atomization, amorphousness– while the city itself is increasingly seen as the locus of a valuable mode of experience that is coming under pressure by the dual processes of centralization and diffusion. (Smyth, "The Right" 26–27)

The protagonist's eventual dislocation in the urban milieu, together with an absent nurturing home, triggers her search for an alternative, which she identifies with Gwen's family in Wales. As the author has explained:

She is striving for the normality that she sees in other people's families. They all look so happy. I mean, little knowing of course, that other families

are not probably that happy . . . She is constantly moving from place to place to try and find balance, I suppose, and she perceives her friend Gwen as having the perfect family: mother-father-daughter. (Morales-Ladrón, “I Write” 131)

A rite-of-passage is then initiated with her dangerous escapade with her little brother in a journey across the Atlantic, which offers her a world of possibilities, starting with the meeting of an old woman who mentors them and acts as a surrogate mother, until they arrive to the more functional household where her friend lives. Her emotions being both informed and affected by nature, one of the first things she notices when she arrives is that “the sky is different in Wales” (159). The awakening experience, however, will force her return home to a less pastoral ideal governed by an organic order that respects the rules of nature.

## 5. THE RIVER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Ní Chonchúir’s apparent romantic and idealised rendering of the surrounding nature is patent at a turning point in the novel. Back home, in the house by the river, the protagonist will have to come to terms with the fact that the laws of nature can also be malignant. Subverting the classic dichotomy between the urban and the rural novel, the natural forces of the river will destabilise its apparent benign peace. In a picnic held by the river, her little baby brother falls and drowns. Although it is the result of an accident that underlines male incapability and negligence to mind children, as portrayed in the novel, since they were playing cards and drinking beer, the protagonist feels responsible, as she has been his ultimate guardian. From her own projective mind, she can only see that the Liffey, the river of life, has suddenly betrayed her bringing death and, with it, the acknowledgement of the danger of an overpowering nature: “For the first time ever you felt afraid of the water; it looked black and angry, and you thought you could see whirlpools turning on it” (119). The author has explained that she lost her own five-year-old cousin in similar circumstances and that “drowning has always lurked in my brain, like a threat. We were warned not to go near the river but we were always by the riverside, paddling, catching minnows or whatever we could do. We were just drawn to it” (Morales-Ladrón, “I Write” 134).

When her mother discovers that she has lost her baby in the river, she finds herself unable to separate the terror she feels from the

magnetising influence of its force. Recovering from her mental breakdown, she sits all day in the kitchen with “her back to the window, with the blind drawn all the time, so that she couldn’t see the river” (111), in a place where she strategically could not avoid the feeling of its mighty presence. Early in the story, the girl had already made clear that although there had been two floods in the house, due to the proximity to the river, her mother had refused to move out. In this regard, Roswitha Mueller has explained such paradoxical relationship with the environment contending that:

Organic societies tended to model themselves on nature rather than trying to bring nature under human domination. While nature was seen as both a benevolent and nurturing mother and also as devastation and chaos, the latter aspect only increased respect and a desire to remain in harmony with it as much as possible. (35)

Thus, the comforting power of the river, as much as its threat, is accepted and revered by the community as a natural might that cannot be challenged by human force.

For any family, coming to terms with death and loss, especially that of an infant child, can be one of the most excruciating and distressful experiences they can go through. In the development of the narrative rendered by the girl, such dramatic event prompts a turning point after which both parents make decisions in favour of the future well-being of the children. Bridging the gap between the two families, in sharing loss, they come to terms with difference. The result being precisely a more balanced distribution of the two households and ecosystems, so that they can accommodate the children’s needs for affection. This search for harmony through grief is represented by the catharsis and purification that the symbolic movement of the water has brought. It was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who, in the sixth century BC, argued that nobody could stand twice in the same river, since we are subject to constant change and water, like time, flows. Once its uncontrollable power is interiorised, the protagonist is ready to resume her connection to the river which, in turn, will attach her to the mother. With an image that blends both mother and river into a nurturing metaphor, the novel ends with an uplifting note that pictures the girl overlooking the river through the window, a river that has always protected her at the same time that her mother is ready to embrace her:

The kitchen door opens, so you pop your head back in front watching the river to see who's there.

It's your ma. She folds her arms and smiles at you, so you smile back. You think she looks happy to see you. You're certainly happy to see her. (186)

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this discussion, I have applied an ecocritical reading to the analysis of Ní Chonchúir's debut novel *You*, an introspective narrative focalised on a ten-year-old narrator, whose life is divided by two households placed in two different ecosystems, ruled by equally dysfunctional parents. Opposing the horizontal and communal organic order of a semi-urban house by the river, where the protagonist lives an unstructured life with her mother, to the vertical modern crowded urban suburbs, where her father has just formed a new family, has opened up a way from which to address how the protagonist perceives her milieu and is in turn affected by it.<sup>18</sup> In between these two dwellings lies the powerful force of the river Liffey in both its benign and dangerous potential. (Dis)placed and (dis)located in the two sites, the girl will project onto the river her basic emotional nurturing needs until she is eventually forced to grow and come to terms with pain and loss.

In placing both semi-urban and city life as two sites of interaction and unresolved conflict, Ní Chonchúir initially plays around with the traditional country versus city dichotomy to further explore the possibilities offered by a river, as a metaphor of change, liberation and re-birth, contributing ultimately to transgress such a historic divide. The relationship of the child protagonist with nature and, specially, her kinship with the comforting lulling sound of the river paces her own emotional growth and maturity, one that eventually forces her to come to terms with its threat and danger. The novel ends leaving the girl at that "pre-teen twilight of being too young to be an adult and too old to be a child" (Hogan). Ultimately, *You* highlights how the river is a unifying metaphor that blends the laws of nature with those created by humankind, thus transgressing artificial boundaries between ecosystems and historical binaries.

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<sup>18</sup> I am using here Tuan's concept of topophilia, whereas the term topophobia is my own adapted version from Susan Jean Strife's ecophobia, which she applies to children's perception of their ecosystem, and defines as "a broad fear of environmental deterioration and environmental problems" (Strife 37).



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