Animals, Flowers, Trees, Landscape, the Sea: Natural Symbols in Helen Dunmore's *A Spell of Winter*

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0. Introduction

Dunmore's novels are among the most fascinating books I have ever read. Therefore, I am of the opinion that it is about time they should be taken scholarly note of. This paper was written originally as a presentation in a seminar taught by Gerd Rohmann, at the University of Kassel, in 1997. Since I found out that only very little critical work about Dunmore's novels has been produced so far, I decided to elaborate my presentation paper into a proper essay. I have kept the structure of my paper, however, so that my subtitles can be used as a guideline through my work.

When I first heard about Prof. Rohmann's plan to make us work about a contemporary piece of literature without the possibility of using secondary sources of criticism to the book itself, I was fascinated. I am somebody who prefers to develop her own ideas, and therefore, I am always happy to be able to work without many sources of criticism. However, when it came to working about Dunmore's novel, I had to realise rather quickly that it was difficult to analyse all the symbols Dunmore uses concerning their different meanings. It is clear to every reader who looks carefully at Dunmore's descriptions that there must be more behind their obvious meaning, but what exactly is underneath this surface?

A Spell of Winter[1] belongs to the genre of magic realism, which Cuddon describes as follows:

> Some of the characteristic features of this kind of fiction are the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre, skilful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable.[2]

[1] Helen Dunmore: *A Spell of Winter* (London: Penguin, 1996). All references are made to this edition.

[2] J. A. Cuddon: *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, [4]1999), p. 488.

Originally, the term was coined to describe paintings of the 1920‘s, which were “marked by the use of still, sharply defined, smoothly painted images of figures and objects depicted in a somewhat surrealistic manner”[3] As we will see later, this description can be used for some of Dunmore’s descriptions as well. There is a relatively clear ‘surface-meaning‘ for which a deeper understanding is not even necessary. Nevertheless, there also is another, deeper structure built up from symbols and their deeper meanings which appear to be visible through the simple surface like the shape of the body shimmers through a chiffon dress.

It is my purpose to present some of these descriptions in this paper and to reveal the symbols. I have chosen those connected with nature, but I do not claim the paper to be complete. It is meant to be a first attempt to discuss Dunmore’s use of symbols in a scholarly context, but I hope that it becomes a starting point for a vivid discussion about Dunmore’s literary work.

I am going to divide each section of my paper (i. e. each symbol which I want to have a closer look at) into two parts: First, I want to give the ‘surface structure’, the description in Dunmore’s novel, and then, I intend to have a closer look at the meanings beneath the surface. Doing so, I will use some other novels to compare the way in which the symbol in question is used. To find out the general meaning of the symbols, I will use definitions from special dictionaries of symbols.

1. Animals

1.1. The Hare

1.1.1. The Hare in the Story

The hare appears first in Chapter One, when Cathy, walking in the fields around the house, has a flashback of memory:

> This was where Rob shot the hare. It was bad luck to shoot a hare, they said in the kitchen even as they took it from us and exclaimed over its size and the fine roast it would make. He didn’t kill her cleanly. She came like running water over the rise in the field, her ears flat on her body, her big legs bounding in great leaps. ... Rob swung up his gun and shot her. We ran to where she was lying, big ripples running through her flesh as she felt the wound. ...
>
> I took Rob’s gun and he got the hare by her ears and swung Grandfather’s blackthorn stick. She gave a buck in his hands then she

[3] Ibid, p. 487.

> was still and her eyes began to film over at once though blood dripped steadily out from the hole in her thigh. ...
>
> "she won't have young at this season," said Rob, as if he was arguing with someone. ...
>
> I knew the hare sickened him. She was a bagful of blood, dripping, not the beautiful thing she had been. ...
>
> ...You had to know how long to hang each creature. So long for a piece of venison, so long for a pheasant or hare. Grandfather knew everything about hanging animals. But you didn't call them animals once they were shot, you called them game. Like you called people corpses.[4]

This scene belongs to those which reappear again and again throughout the novel. one of the key-scenes is Miss Gallagher's death in Chapter Sixteen, another one can be found in Chapter Twenty-three, in which Cathy finally breaks free. In Chapter Sixteen, Cathy threatens Miss Gallagher with the buried hare before she frightens her to death:

> "It's ill-luck to meet a hare, did you know that? ... There's a poem Kate told me. ... The hare has a hundred names, did you know that? You must call her by all of them. *Call him ditch-diver, broken-leg, black-on-the-ears, white belly, beat-the-wind*... She was big, you know, as big as a young child. Do you believe in ghosts, Miss Gallagher?"[5]

In Chapter Twenty-three, Cathy thinks about the hare for the last time:

> I dug a hole and buried the coat. First the hare, then the little female thing, then Miss Gallagher and my grandfather. The coat was the last thing I buried.[6]

The symbol of the hare is one of the strongest and most important ones in Dunmore's novel, used in a much wider sense than others, like the roses.

1.1.2. The Hare, the Mother, the Child.

Everybody who knows about old Easter habits in Europe knows that the hare is a fertility symbol. Schmeil says in his famous *Leitfaden der Tierkunde*:

> Der Hase zieht im Frühjahr selbander zu Felde und kommt im Herbste zu 16 zurück. [The hare goes out into the fields alone in springtime, but he returns with 15 in autumn.][7]

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[4] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 11 – 12.

[5] Ibid, p. 205, emphasis Dunmore.

[6] Ibid, p.310.

The same can be said about the rabbit as well, in fact; regarding modern literature, cartoons and comics, the rabbit nowadays is regarded much more so than the hare. But there are two reasons why Dunmore might have chosen the hare for a fertility symbol: First, hares are very unprotected against bad weather or enemies, therefore, their young are in much greater danger while growing up than young rabbits are in their burrows. The rather solitary hare hardly has the undergrowth between fields as a shelter, and it normally only hides in the furrows. It has so many enemies that Schmeil chose this fact as a foundation for his description of the hare[8].

Another reason is that the hare is closely related to witchcraft. Frazer mentions that both cats and hares are the animals into which "witches were most usually supposed to transform themselves."[9] This second reason gains a special weight in the scene in the woods when Cathy threatens Miss Gallagher and calls the hare by all her names.[10] Here, along with the hare, the cat is mentioned[11], which clearly reveals the setting of a scene which, at least, hints at the use of witchcraft. But apart from that, already at the beginning of the story Cathy is thinking about the evil omen of shooting a hare, in this special case most possibly a mother, too. She, also the symbol of unprotectedness, is killed brutally. And as with Cathy's child, there is absolutely no reason for killing the victim. Cathy has no chance to protect her daughter when Miss Gallagher threatens her – in the name of love![12] – with the punishment she will have to suffer when somebody finds out about her sexual relationship with her brother. The killing-birth of the child is as bloody as the shooting of the hare. In both cases Cathy realises too late how beautiful the living creature was or would have been. The hare becomes "a bagful of blood"[13], her daughter "a little

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[7] Otto Schmeil: *Leitfaden der Tierkunde* (Heidelberg: Quelle&Meyer, [170]1949), p. 63. Translation: EO.in the German version, the original hare is included in the number counted, so that it is one higher than its English translation.

[8] Comp. ibid, p. 61 – 63. Concerning the rabbit see pp. 59 – 61.

[9] James G. Frazer: *The Golden Bough* A Study in Magic and Religion (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 860.

[10] The process of naming something implies to have force over it. This belief appears in the Indian as well as in the Viking religion, and in many myths.

[11] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 203.

[12] Ibid. p. 180, comp. also pp. 131 – 133.

[13] Ibid, p. 11.

female thing"[14].The child was not abnormal. Only afterwards Cathy realises the senselessness of her abortion. In both cases a certain rashness causes the senseless death of an innocent creature and transforms something beautiful into something ugly. In Cathy's case, this rashness is caused by fear, in Rob's, by something like greed, regarding the quality of hare meat[15]. It is no wonder that Cathy compares the hare to her baby when she attacks Miss Gallagher in the woods. The latter, like Rob, was driven by a sort of greed, namely *Schadenfreude* over Cathy's fate. In addition, both killings show the bad effect a decision made from rashness can have.

The hare has one more meaning which I have not discussed yet; that of a mother who leaves her children. In Dunmore's novel one can find three examples: the hare herself, Cathy, and Cathy's mother. Whereas the hare had no chance and Cathy's deed was forced by circumstances, there remains the case of her mother. Was Cynthia forced to leave her husband and children, and if so, by what? Neither Cathy and Rob nor the reader get an answer to this question, although Rob has his own ideas why his mother went away[16]. However, it is not too unlikely that Cynthia really has deserted her children. The fact that Rob is an orphan himself makes his killing of a mother even worse, and indeed, he has to fight against his bad conscience by emphasising that "[s]he won't have young this season"[17]. Cathy reassures him, although she knows better. Rob has done what he has done to Cathy and himself. There is no reason to make it worse by reproaches. Cathy realises that the best way for her brother to overcome his guilt is to repress and try to ignore it.

In all these cases, the children are to die. Cathy is the exception to this rule because she manages to break free from her past by the help of Mr. Bullivant. The hare, normally used as a fertility symbol, becomes a symbol of perverted fertility, fertility that leads to death and destruction, not to new life.

1.2. Starcrossed

Starcrossed is one of the symbols which I included in this study for personal reasons. By discussing the symbolic meaning of this horse I want to demonstrate how even

[14] Ibid, p. 188.

[15] Comp. ibid, p. 12.

[16] Comp. ibid, p. 103.

[17] Ibid, p. 11.

a simple and perhaps even obvious-looking thing can gain a deeper meaning in Dunmore's novel.

1.2.1. Starcrossed as a Status Symbol

> Mr Bullivant had a new hunter, brought home two weeks ago, and Rob hadn't seen it yet. He couldn't wait to go and torture himself with the sight of what he could never buy....
>
> ...In another minute [Rob would] be calling Mr Bullivant 'sir', ...Anything to get what he wanted. But horses were just things Mr Bullivant had because he needed them, and he had Starcrossed because it would never occur to him to buy anything but the best, whether it was brick or horseflesh..[18]

Obviously, Starcrossed can be regarded as a status symbol, as valuable horses always have been[19]. The animal is of no special value for its owner, it is only the best of what is necessary. Rob, however, sees something different in Starcrossed: Although he naturally recognises the value of the horse and later the privilege he gains in riding it, he also sees the special qualities of the animal as such, a dream which is out of his reach. And moreover, riding Starcrossed gives Rob a chance to be in the company of Livvy, the girl he is in love with[20]. Both Cathy and Rob are to marry into good families, and for Rob Starcrossed is a kind of entrance ticket into society. Not only can Rob accompany Livvy riding Starcrossed, the fact Mr Bullivant gives his valuable horse to him shows how much his owner trusts him, although he comes from a family with a suspect background. This trust makes Rob more attractive and acceptable for the society Livvy and her family belong to. Like Cathy with Mr Bullivant himself, Rob has a chance to escape. Livvy's reaction on the accident, which I want to look at more closely in the following chapter, shows how much of a status symbol the horse is: Once Starcrossed is dead, Rob is out of the line of potential husbands for Livvy.

This meaning of Starcrossed agrees well with the general symbolic meanings horses can have. They are seen as images of strength, power, and victory.[21] Another context in which horses often appear is the one of freedom and independence, which in my opinion was coined by the image of the cowboy in the Wild West, which is used in many

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[18] Ibid. p. 78.

[19] A hint at this can be found in Erhard Breitner: *Jeanne du Barry* (Leipzig: E. P. Tal Co., 1938), p. 241.

[20] Comp. *A Spell of Winter*, p. 61 – 62.

[21] Comp: Hans Biedermann: *Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole* (Augsburg: Weltbild, 2000), p. 336 – 337.

films of the 'Western' genre. Dunmore seems to hint at this image when she creates a horse as Rob's first chance to escape his past.

1.2.2. Starcrossed and the Starcrossed Lovers

However, the potential marriage between Rob and Livvy is not where the story ends. Rob, being out with Livvy and Starcrossed, has a severe accident in which both he and the horse break their legs. Starcrossed is shot, and Rob, as an invalid, returns into Cathy's caring and caressing arms. His chance to escape his past has been lost.

Rob should have thought better than to ride a horse which is called Starcrossed, no matter how good and precious he is. Obviously, the Animal's name is taken from Shakespeare's famous play *Romeo and Juliet*:

> From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
> A pair of star-crossed lovers take their lives
> Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
> Doth with their death bury their parent's strife.[22]

Starcrossed indeed is the "Unstern"[23] which means ill-luck to Rob and his love. Although Livvy seems to be the one in charge of the situation after the accident, she will not be the one to look after him on the sickbed:

> "*She's* not staked her claim, then?" asked Kate
> "She'll go home," I said, "and change her clothes for dinner, and she'll eat it, too. She'll just be a bit paler than usual so that everyone asks her why."[24]

Generally, it can be said that Livvy appears not exactly as a loving, caring person anyway. Her paleness is a strong signal of her coolness, the greenish paleness[25], of her dancing dress and her pale face reminding Cathy of a mermaid[26], attractive as it may seem, yet unable to radiate any real feeling except a nice, decent appearance. She seems to see in

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[22] William Shakespeare: "Romeo and Juliet" in: Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Hrsg.), *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition* (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 872.

[23] Helen Dunmore: *Der Duft des Schnees* (Bergisch Gladbach: Lübbe, 2000), p. 105(German translaton of *A Spell of Winter*).

[24] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 165.

[25] Ibid, p. 60.

[26] Ibid, p. 55.

Rob a smart man who comes from a background good enough so that she can show off with him. Rob 'is worth something', since Mr Bullivant trusts him. Grandfather, however, thinks about Livvy the same way: As Cathy informs us, for him; Livvy is just "money Rob might get hold of"[27]. In contrast to Romeo and Juliet, Rob's and Livvy's love appears as a nice match.

However, after the accident, it is over. It must be clear to Livvy that Rob, unable to pay for Starcrossed, must have lost Mr Bullivant's friendship. The ticket into society and another life turns out to be the exact opposite. This is surprising especially since Rob knows how to deal with a horse perfectly. Not only can he ride very well, he also has the feeling for an excellent horse. So, the accident was anything but likely. Starcrossed turns out to have a very fitting name.

It is not really clear what Rob thinks of Livvy. His feelings for her are never mentioned; when it comes to discussing their potential future partners, it is Rob who tells Cathy they should not marry. While Cathy already seems to develop a feeling for her chance of escape, Rob truly is caught in the past. His ticket out of this past only reveals itself as a big piece of bad luck. Rob really is star-crossed, and not just by the horse.

Starcrossed embodies another symbolic meaning of his species, which is fear[28], and which he shows clearly when he shies before the animal under his hoofs. He, regarded as a symbol, combines both the negative and positive aspects of symbolic horses. Since, however, nowadays the positive aspects of horses are much better known and stronger, they have been developed into a cliché, which now is turned negative by Starcrossed.

2.Flowers: Roses

2.1. The Roses in the Novel

There are two important scenes in which the roses are presented in the novel. In both cases, they are dark red, with big petals which spread a strong, sweet smell. The first one is in Chapter Three, which describes the siblings' visit to "The Sanctuary":

> We came round a bench in the bank of roses and there was Father. He was breathing in long whistling breaths, as if he'd been running and was trying not to gasp for air. ... Father pulled me against him. He pulled me hard against the roses. There were petals all over the ground and the

[27] ibid, p. 163.

[28] Biedermann (2000), p, 337.

> crushed smell hurt my eyes and spilled down my face in salty gulps. He was holding me too tight, he was hurting me-
>
> "Father!" I cried. We were shaking and I didn't know if the shaking started in him or in me. He was burning hot, even through my clothes. He kissed my hair and kissed my head with quick, hot, clumsy kisses. But it wasn't me he was kissing. His voice came thick and hot by my ear as he crouched down and clutched me to him. "Cincie," he said. "Cincie, Cincie, Cincie." I wriggled and twisted but I couldn't get away from his voice. ...
>
> ...it was summer and the smell of roses licked at us like the tongue of an animal.[29]

The smell of these roses is "strong enough to choke us.[30]

This scene is foreshadowed by the appearance of many other roses around the sanatorium, those in Father's room and those on the carpet, "as big as cabbages...[in] the colour of beetroot, or the blood that oozed from the butcher's parcels..."[31], as Cathy observes on her way to her father's room.

The next scene in which roses play a role is that in which Cathy's grandfather dies. Here, it is again the smell of the roses which characterises the scene:

> As the lumps melted a smell of roses curled into the room. Dark red roses, red almost to blackness and fleshy at the base of their petals, with drops of dew standing of them.[32]

These roses are exactly like the ones Cathy saw in her father's room.

The two scenes depicted above show clearly in which way roses are used in the story. There are some other scenes, but they have to be considered in the context of these two scenes and will be used in their proper places.

2.2. The Symbolic Meaning of the Roses in the Novel

It is obvious that Dunmore gives her dark red roses a negative meaning: their smell is chokingly strong, their colour reminds Cathy of blood. Generally, however, roses

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[29] Ibid, p. 39 – 41.

[30] Ibid, p. 39.

[31] Ibid. p. 28.

[32] Ibid, p. 283.

especially red ones, are regarded as the symbol of love[33]. Indeed, this is part of their symbolic meaning, but it is not all. Traces of love can be found in both scenes above. Cathy's father expresses his love for his runaway wife in a threatening manner to Cathy, Mrs Blazer pays with physical love for the **attar** of roses which helps Cathy's grandfather die. Both 'loves', however, do not correspond to what is regarded as 'proper love' in the society Cathy lives in. Again, Dunmore uses a well-known cliché and perverts it.

Another symbolic meaning of roses is their connection with death. Although generally white roses seem to have this meaning[34], dark red roses have gained it, too. Symbols always are ambivalent, at least. Another example of this can be found in Hellmann's novel *Zwei Frauen*, in which a bunch of dark red roses is both the heroine's last birthday present to her dying friend Claudia, and her farewell greeting which follows Claudia into the grave[35]. Dunmore uses such roses not just as a symbol of death, but, additionally, of decease. Both Cathy's father and grandfather are bound to the family house, and both die a slow death because the aims they have striven for appear beyond realisation. The latter wanted to pass on to his son-in-law everything he had worked for, however, this man died before his time. The dream dies along with the man who dreamed it. For Cathy, the smell of the roses is like her grandfather's dream: It overwhelms and chokes her[36]. There are two deaths which would fit into the context but which are not connected with the rose symbol; Rob's, and Cathy's daughter's. However, both were not in the position of possible inheritors when they died. Rob already had lost his place in the family when he escaped to Canada, and Cathy's daughter was not meant to be known, she was not even wanted to live. Both were killed in addition, they did not decease. Only those connected to the dream are warned of their death by the signal of the rose[37].

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[33] Maria Leach: *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1972),p. 975.

[34] Biedermann (2000), p. 365.

[35] Diana Beate Hellmann: *Zwei Frauen* (Bergisch Gladbach: Lübbe, [18]1991), pp. 358 – 361 and 427 – 428.

[36] I will come back to this aspect in another context.

[37] In this context, I thought of an old fairy tale about monks who were informed that they would die soon by finding a rose on their chair when they came to breakfast. I heared this tale in school, but I cannot give a source for it.

The connection of roses and blood is not Dunmore's invention either. It was first established in the myth of Adonis' death[38], and Wilde uses it in his fairy tale "The Nightingale and the Rose". Both speak of love beyond death. Again, Dunmore perverts the symbol by reducing it not to the thrashy possibility of the cliché, but to the disgusting effect which blood often has. Both men connected with the red roses have something bad in their blood, Cathy's grandfather is possessed by his dream as if by a fever, his son-in-law carries his mental disease within him. The family (although Cathy's father has married into the family I would like to speak about a blood-line) is bound to decay. It is not surprising that Cathy wants to plant different flowers on her daughter's grave, "... they would be slim, narrow-petalled yellow roses, not the fat red ones my father had spilled all over me."[39] These roses, the only ones which stand for love beyond death and the hope of forgiveness for murder, are not coloured by blood.

The first scene is much stronger than the second one, for several reasons: First, here the symbolic meanings of the roses are manifested, and second, the fact that the younger man dies first is important for the development of the story. He was the person on whom all hopes concerning both the family's economic situation and their establishment in the village society were based[40]. When the son (in law) dies before the father (in law), the decay of the family cannot be stopped. At the older man's death the motif only is repeated, thereby showing that the process of decay now , with the death of the 'patriarch', is complete.

Soon after, Cathy has to give up her fight for the roses in the garden, which are nearly dead already. She accepts that she has to give up both the house and her grandfather's dream.

> This is the dream of a man who came from nowhere with nothing.
> It needn't be mine.[41]

That this becomes clear to her while she is trying to keep the roses free from the overgrowth by bindweed strengthens the connection of roses and decay. Dunmore cleverly

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[38] Biedermann, p. 365. In ovid's Metamorphoses, a rose directly is not mentioned, only a red flower.

[39] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 189.

[40] Comp. *A Spell of Winter*, p. 42, 55 – 56, 297. Coming "From nowhere with nothing", Grandfather always had a difficult position in the village.

[41] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 297.

breaks the well-established image of roses by giving their normally very positive symbolic meaning such a disturbing undertone.

3. Trees

3.1. Birch Versus Laurel

There is only one long scene in which these trees are used, however, this scene is very important since it reveals much background information about Cynthia alias “Cincie”, Cathy’s mother. After Rob’s departure to Canada, Cathy and her grandfather have a conversation in which the trees appear as an introduction to Cynthia as the important topic:

> Outside Grandfather’s window was a laurel tree which had grown up to hide half the window. He would not have it cut back. He seemed to like its dim, leathery leaves feeling at the glass, but to me they weren’t like living things at all. I would have chosen something supple and tender to look at every day, like a birch or a beech, and I said so.
>
> “Don’t be a fool, Catherine, you can’t have a beech growing so close to the house.”
>
> “Or wisteria.”
>
> “That wouldn’t live out of the sun. What’s wrong with my laurel?”
>
> “It’s so stiff. The sun doesn’t come through it. And it doesn’t shake and make shadows when the breeze turns the leaves. That’s what I like.”
>
> ...
>
> He turned sharply on his pillow, raised himself on one elbow and said: “That’s what you like, is it?”
>
> ...
>
> ...”Yes,” I said, surprised, “I like to look up at the sky through the leaves.”[42]

There is much more in these two different trees than one might imagine from the first impression. I think that both trees characterise the persons who like them, and in this respect, like in so many others, Cathy is like her mother. Grandfather, who came from nowhere, or rather: Ireland, is, for all that he is, a self-made man, tough, straightforward, someone who exactly plans his future even down to his grandchildren. He also is nobody’s friend, and he could survive where others would die. The same is true for his laurel as well as his cacti. The laurel survives very near the house and in the shadow, its leaves are made in a way to be protected against bad weather and, being stiff and leathery, they seem not to be a favourite meal of many insects. Laurel is connected with victory, and said to be never

[42] Ibid. p. 246 – 247.

hit by lightning too[43]; Grandfather always was successful, too, when his status and fortune was concerned. Apart from that, laurels do not shed their leaves in autumn. Grandfather, too, cannot let go of either the things he has worked and fought for or of his dream. Cacti survive under even more threatening conditions; they fight heat and possible enemies with their spikes. Grandfather seems to be ready to attack as well, if necessary, and like a cactus in the desert, he has not many friends.

The women are much more sensitive. 'Their' birch is much more supple and tender. Indeed, personally I, being a birch-lover myself, think that birches are among the trees which react even to the slightest breeze, the sun reaches easily through this constantly moving veil of leaves. Cathy and Cynthia are open to and even strongly attracted by new or different impressions and circumstances. Examples of this might be Cathy's study of Mr Bullivant's pictures , her generally clear and very sharp senses or her vivid fantasy.

The contrast between both types is very big. It seems rather obvious to me that two persons as different as birch and laurel cannot live together without clashing from time to time. Although it is stated only indirectly, this seems to me a hint at Cynthia's reasons to abandon her family. As a birch cannot survive close to the walls of a house and out of the sun, she felt imprisoned in her father's dream. He could not give her what she needed:

> "Even when I was holding her she was wanting to crib herself round into something soft that wasn't there. The way a man's body is made, it's like a rack of ribs. It doesn't fit to a child."[44]

Furthermore, this particular man's thoughts, opinions and dreams do not fit that particular child. He thinks he gives her everything, he thinks he does everything for her. However, he does not fulfil her dreams (only those he has for her), he does not even satisfy her emotional needs. When she was little, he was able to find out, but, as older laurel leaves stiffen with increasing age, he, too, became insensitive to her. It is not a surprise that Cynthia finally left.

3.2. Oranges and Lemons

The two rather exotic trees appear in different scenes throughout the novel. The orange trees have been planted by Cathy's father in his youth:

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[43] Biedermann (2000), p. 271.

[44] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 247.

> He had planted twenty, and these four had survived and grown into trees. ... Every summer they went out to the terrace, and they were brought into the conservatory again before the first frosts. My grandfather saw to it still. I lit the candle and at once the sour wizened oranges that the trees bore shone out like treasures. Their dark dusty leaves made pointed shadows on the floor[45].

The lemon trees do not appear in the novel directly, but their fruits are delivered to Ash Court, Mr Bullivant's house, regularly.

> The lemons hung lamp-like behind flickering, dark leaves, in the lemon house of Mr Bullivant's villa in Italy. The earth was dry and in the winter there was the smell of the oil stoves which kept the frost from burning the lemon trees.[46]

Again, both trees are closely connected to their planters, and as oranges and lemons belong to the same family of trees, so their planters can be described as belonging to the same category of men: Both do not originally belong to the family, but they have married into it[47]. Both have rare but exquisite qualities which Grandfather likes, and therefore, both are new bearers of hope for Grandfather that the family finally is established and, as far as Cathy is concerned, that she is "taken care of, close but out of the way"[48]. Both come, or, at least, appear to come from a bourgeois background; Cathy's father, like Livvy, certainly was the child of one of the 'better families' in the village. Mr Bullivant is rich, and he has an estate in Italy, his home country. Knowing about his activities in the railroad business in Canada[49], he appears rather like a self – made man, however, his riches make him a member of the upper class.

In contrast to him, Cathy's father appears degenerated. He acts like a man of his class, but he does not really seem to work. Whether he had ever learned to run a larger estate may be doubted. His illness (which, by the way, develops before Cynthia leaves and

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[45] Ibid, p. 67 – 68.

[46] Ibid, p. 63.

[47] I cannot prove the fact that Cathy marries Mr Bullivant at the end of the book, but the fact that she goes with him to France and Italy, leaving her home behind completely, is a definite signal of a strong, lasting bond between them. So is the high degree of intimacy between them. In this particular case I would range every kind of relationship equal to marriage.

[48] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 56.

[49] Ibid, p. 252 – 253.

seems to be the reason of breaking up with her family)[50] can be regarded as an additional sign of degeneration. In a way, the oranges are the same: most of the original plants did not survive at all, and the four which did have never reached their natural height, otherwise it would not be possible to move them from the terrace into the conservatory and vice versa. Due to their roots being caught in too narrow space, they cannot develop properly. Neither do their fruits reach their full ripeness. They are not edible either, they are only good for decoration. Their sourness is specially mentioned and contrasts significantly with the ripe, almost sweet, taste of Mr Bullivant's lemons. Cathy's father appears to be a highly impressive man, but when one looks closer, it becomes evident that he is not really able to fulfil the high expectations put into him.

Mr Bullivant is much more energetic, enthusiastic, purposeful. He does not just own Ash Court, he works on it. And he does not just plant his lemons, he cultivates them, and he uses their fruits. Wherever he lives, he seems to be perfectly at home. His different experiences have made him into a mature, strong personality who can afford to go his own way. In addition, he has become aware of and open for things different from the accepted norms of the society surrounding him[51]. In a manner of speaking, he is always on the ground which suits him. His money enables him to keep his standard of living wherever he moves. Nevertheless, his home is, and remains, Italy, although he was not born there. His lemon trees are planted under the best conditions. They have the soil of the area in which they grow naturally and additional frost protection. Therefore, their fruits are extraordinarily good. They even are meant to be consumed, be it eaten as they are, or as sherbet, or as lemonade. Mr Bullivant invests much into his projects, but his investment bears rich fruit indeed.

In this respect, he is equal to Cathy. She, too, becomes used to hardship and proves her ability to work hard. Cathy appears to me as much more viable than Rob. It is a part of her essence and seems to be the aspect of her character about which Mr Bullivant says:

> "... When I think of you – when I thought of you – it always had this sharpness, like lemons."[52]

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[50] Comp. ibid, pp. 139 – 148.

[51] The pictures in his study and the rather big tea cups he uses are examples of this. Comp. *A Spell of Winter*, pp. 84 and 85 – 87.

[52] Ibid, p. 295.

Both Cathy and Mr Bullivant are shaped – especially hardened and strengthened – by their experiences, and both are able to let go and break free. Their experiences help them understand each other and strengthens their bond. It is not really a surprise that he can convince her to come with him. Again, Dunmore turns a popular image around. Oranges, generally known and regarded as tasteful, sweet fruit, become the symbol of decay and inviability. Lemons, generally said to be inedible when they are raw, become the symbol of the life force by their very taste which Dunmore turns into sweetness.

4. Landscape

4.1. The Woods

It is not difficult to imagine the kind of landscape Dunmore generally describes. Before my inner eye I see some solitary farms and mansions, a village not too far away, and fields and meadows surrounded by bushgrowth and mostly uncultivated woods. These woods are described fantastically in Chapter Sixteen, when Cathy leads Miss Gallagher into the part of them closest to the house:

> We were deep in the woods now. ... Even in winter, when the leaves were off the trees, you could not see far. There was the scrub of holly and rhododendrons, and long curtains of old man's beard hung, browning. It was a place for ivy and dark-leaved things which did not die easily. [53]

Furthermore, the rather tight growth of bramble is mentioned.

It is clear that Dunmore needs a dark, hidden setting for the scene she creates here. Within the wood there are places where things and actions can be hidden excellently, and, in addition, it is the sort of landscape Miss Gallagher dislikes most, being "a woman of paths and gardens."[54] The place is perfect to frighten the old governess – it "was quickly getting the better of her jollity."[55], because it is entirely opponent to her own nature.

[53] Ibid, p. 202.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

Therefore, the surface meaning Dunmore has implied in the woods is that of an excellent setting for Miss Gallagher's death – be it murder or not.[56]

Cathy's question "Do you believe in ghosts, Miss Gallagher?"[57] reveals the second plane of meaning the woods have in the novel. The clearing in which the scene takes place reminds me of one of the kind Frazer[58] describes as old places of worship, the only difference existing in the size of them. However, I have a problem with saying that Dunmore had tree-spirits in mind when she wrote this scene. Describing nature as animate is part of her version of Magic Realism, and not a means to involve ancient faiths. Cathy does not go into the woods and to the clearing to receive the tree-spirits' power, but she looks for a surrounding which she likes and in which she is superior. Neither does she really believe in the hare-ghost she calls on to in the clearing. Rather, she uses her to frighten Miss Gallagher, who is the superstitious person. Although she says that ghosts are "against my religion"[59], her reaction to Cathy's words proves the opposite. But she is not just superstitious, and "a woman of paths and gardens", she also is a stranger to emotions. The way she treats the girls in St Agatha's is a clear example for this[60], and so are the threats she uses against Cathy. Of the emotions these girls feel she knows nothing. Cathy takes her revenge by using the same methods her old teacher used against her, but she plays at her enemy's weak point, superstiion and shock. She takes strongest action in a surrounding which suits her best. One can describe Cathy as the nature person, whose sense of nature is so well developed that she can 'read' natural happenings like a friend's emotions (hence the strong animation of nature). She feels utterly protected:

> It was dark but I could find my way in and out of this wood blindfold. There was the feather touch of old man's beard against my face to guide me, and smooth holly trunks when I put out my fingers. The earth cupped my moving feet at each step.[61]

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[56] It is clear that Cathy does not kill Miss Gallagher by force. If she intends to, I cannot definitely say, but I suppose she might. Definitely, she deliberately takes the risk of killing Miss Gallagher by frightening her. Nevertheless, I am not sure if this is murder because I cannot prove that Cathy wants to kill Miss Gallagher. There is, however, a certain permissiveness leading to manslaughter.

[57] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 205.

[58] Frazer (1967), p. 146.

[59] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 205.

[60] Ibid, p. 130.

[61] Ibid, p. 207.

Therefore, she has the confidence that this friend of hers takes over and looks after the remains of her enemy:

> ... She would be ugly at first, but they would make her beautiful. ... At first they would be frightened but then they would come closer touching her cheeks and the hem of her dress. They'd walk around her until they had mapped the world her body made, then they would begin to climb. In the morning the rooks would rise boasting from their shaggy nests and swirl above the clearing where she lay, stiff with winter dew and starred all over with the points of spiders' webs. A cold fresh breeze would rustle through the undergrowth, and for a while the thrush I'd heard would sing.[62]

It is one of the special strengths of nature to take away traces of the past by constant change. In this case, the aspect of re-integrating Miss Gallagher into the circle of life is definitely positive. However, this strength can have the threatening, destructive aspect of human life.

4. 2. Wilderness versus Civilisation

I have already stated the strong animation of nature Dunmore uses. One of the strongest examples of this can be found on p. 76, when she describes the "scars" and the "healing over" of "the torn earth" at Mr Bullivant's "battlefield". Only something living can receive wounds which heal by a power coming from itself.

This short passage at the beginning of Chapter Seven already reveals the position which Cathy takes: Nature is the original, the only 'right' condition, building and creative activities by men are regarded as operations. This motif appears frequently in literature. Concerning ruins, Frenzel writes:

> Zwar verschmilzt die nicht mehr bewohnte oder benutzte und kaum zu einer Verwendung dienliche Ruine mit der sie umgebenden Natur, wird zum Bestandteil einer Landschaft ... aber sie bleibt doch ein Indiz für menschliche Leistung oder für die Vergänglichkeit solcher Leistung. [Although the ruin, having become uninhabitable or uninhabited and therefore useless, is absorbed by the surrounding nature and becomes part of a landscape ... it still remains a sign of human achievement, or of the transistoriness of such achievement.][63]

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Elisabeth Frenzel: *Motive der Weltliteratur* (Stuttgart: Kröner, [4]1992), p. 618f., translation: EO.

However, Frenzel only presents the exception, the more pessimistic point of view. No matter how beautiful the overgrowth looks, there always is some regret for the breakdown of human craft. However, there are some literary works in which the positive aspect of nature reconquering monuments of civilisation is presented: Kenneth Grahame in *The Wind in the Willows* describes Badger's life in ruins men had built for eternity. Badger speaks about both men and badgers coming and going. "And so it will ever be."[64] In a much more satirical manner Goscinny supports the same point of view in one of his *Asterix* stories in which magic oaks finally overgrow the ruins of a city planned and built with the same claim to eternity as Rome itself.[65] This can, additionally, be seen as a proof of the fact that this motif is not unknown even to trivial genres.

In my opinion, *A Spell of Winter* belongs to these exceptions as well. Cathy's grandfather has bought his house and future, he makes plans and works for them but as soon as he is gone, his dreams have vanished with him. In addition, the positiveness the reconquest of the house has is clearly evident:

> The house is fighting me too, gently, but with great force. It doesn't want to be a house any more. It swarms with life. It has become a place for starlings to nest and rats to scuffle: a habitation of owls. When I went into my grandfather's room his window was dark with leaves. There are so many empty rooms, but I'm not sure there is room for me in any of them. The drive ... is packed with moss now, and the stones cling to one another. They have grown together. This is the dream of a man who came from nowhere with nothing. It needn't be mine.[66]

Despite the strong bond Cathy feels for this house[67], which still is her home, she realises that it does nor make sense to act against its will. The house 'wants to' become part of nature again, and Cathy finally accepts that the dream it originally stood for will rest in peace under the laurel when she gives in. Nature is not Cathy's enemy. She "needn't" fight to keep it in another state. In contrast to the rest of her family, she is able to

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[64] Kenneth Grahame: *The Wind in the Willows* (Leicester: Galley Press, 1987), p. 73.

[65] René Goscinny/Albert Uderzo: *Die Trabantenstadt*/ Großer Asterix-Band XVII (Stuttgart: Ehapa, 1995), pp. 6 and 46 – 47.

[66] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 297,

[67] Comp. ibid, p. 15.

begin "living forwards"[68]. So, she can move on with Mr Bullivant and try to realise the dream of her own, which has developed for a while already.

5. The Sea

Since I consider the motif of the sea differently from the (other) symbols in the novel, I am going to treat it differently as well. It is not possible to go from its surface meaning to its deeper meanings.

In his list of functions a landscape can have in a novel, Daemmrich writes:

> "Landschaft kann ... (3) die Gefühle der Personen spiegeln, ... (6) wichtige Ereignisse unterstreichen, (7) als Raummotiv einen betonten Gegensatz zu anderen Texteinheiten herleiten... [The motif of landscape can be used to ... (3) mirror the characters' feelings ... (6) underline important happenings, (7) build up a contrast to other parts of the text...][69]

Indeed, nowhere in the whole novel does a landscape change so rapidly as the sea, the Atlantic at the coast of Brittany in the epilogue. Throughout the scene the weather is getting worse and worse, along with the growing tension of the situation. A storm is in rising, the tide rises, too, and forces Cathy to stay in her mother's cottage and to meet her. Cathy is ready, and so she can finally find peace in the reunion with her mother:

> The wind howls but my mother is near to me, next to me, her eyes only inches from mine.[70]

The weather is never that extreme in England. Nor is the landscape liable to such changes. This big, situation-changing meaning which includes all three functions I have taken from Daemmrich is the one point which makes me treat this symbol differently.

In addition to its general motivic meaning, the sea is a means of separation, and not just symbolically, but very really. Both Rob and Kate travel over the sea when they leave their home, as her mother has done many years earlier. Even before she leaves, Kate "belonged to the rise and fall of the waves and the slap of the wind."[71] At the end, Cathy

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[68] Comp. ibid, p. 76.

[69] Horst S. Daemmrich/Ingrid Daemmrich: *Themen und Motive in der Literatur* (Tübinger: Francke, 1987), p. 207.; translation: EO.

[70] *A Spell of Winter*, p. 313.

[71] Ibid, p. 225.

herself leaves her old home, and along with it, her past. So, she is separated from it forever. Although she says that she wants to work again, it is more likely that she will do so rather at Mr Bullivant's villa in Italy or at her mother's cottage in France than in England. In France, she appears completely at ease for the first time in the whole novel. The sea has separated her not only from her past, but from her fears, worries, and especially her loneliness also.

Only the crossing of the sea makes it possible for Cathy to meet her mother and eventually allow the process of restoration recreate their relationship. I also think that the process of leaving enables Cathy to understand her mother and the reasons she had for leaving. Their relationship at the moment can be compared to the beach on which the dead porpoise lies. Like the animal, Cynthia seems to have taken the wrong direction, and thereby destroyed her mission of being a mother. There is something as it should not be, something that was beautiful before has turned into something ugly and disturbing, there is something wrong which only time and effort can restore, bit by bit. This becomes obvious when the two women meet:

> Again, like a flood of icy water, I see her not staying by me, not watching my body grow tall beside hers, not measuring my head as it comes to her shoulder, her chin, her eyes. I see my hungry body fitting itself against my brother's. I see the long dark corridors where I have run as a child with Kate's stories flapping at my feet ...[72]

However, the dialogue begins only moments later.

It is interesting how the sea takes over the role of the woods, literally washing away the guiltz that was committed. Cathy hopes that the sea will take the porpoise, so that it is restored to nature again, like the house. The process will take time, but in contrast to the woods, nothing will be left behind. In the graves at the house there are the bones still to be discovered. When the sea takes the porpoise, it will disappear forever. Although Dunmore finishes with an open ending, there definitely is a positive note.

6. Summary

A look at the symbols Dunmore uses clearly reveals that she indeed writes in the style of magic realism. Many of the novel's expressionistic aspects are created by the animation of nature. Dunmore is a specialist in using natural symbols in order to express

[72] Ibid, p. 313.

her message. Doing so, however, she often does not use the symbols in the usual way but turns them ‘upside down’, so that the reader is surprised and even bewildered by their meaning. The roses, the lemons, and the porpoise, too, are examples of this. One of the major topics, which is visible in many of the symbols discussed is the enormous strength of nature, both as destroyer and as healer. Still, the element of nature always is positive, only men and their deeds and relationships are, or can be, destructive. Those who can live in harmony with nature, however, have the hope of recovery. Both Cathy and Mr Bullivant have the sensibility needed.

I have tried to look at several natural symbols which Dunmore uses in her extraordinary novel. Some of them are more obvious and important, others less so. My interpretation of them was based on general knowledge and the use of general dictionaries. I have deliberately not covered all the nature-symbols Dunmore uses since I hope that this essay only is the beginning of a fruitful discussion about Dunmore’s work. Therefore, someone else may feel free to study the meaning of white violets, or Isley Beacon, or, perhaps, of other symbols Dunmore uses in *A Spell of Winter* or in her other novels.

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