

The Romantic Legacy in Helen Dunmore's Short Fiction

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thought, and Romantic thought more broadly, have been a constant presence in, and had relevance for, literary writing ever since the emergence of the Romantic influence on literature and culture, especially regarding fiction, and studies of fiction, centred around or featuring child characters, portrayals and examinations of childhood, and works that are directly a part of the category of children's literature. British contemporary author Helen Dunmore, known for her children's books as well as for her novels and poetry collections, has, compared to, for example, Ian McEwan, not been awarded much attention in the academic field, and, as far as I know, there has been no examination in terms of analysing Romantic influence in her work. This paper aims to examine such Romantic influence in Dunmore's short fiction, namely "The Kiwi-fruit Arbour", "The Clear and Rolling Water", and "Emily's Ring" in her short story collection Ice Cream (2000).

Keywords

Helen Dunmore; contemporary literature; short fiction; Romantic legacy; child image; childhood

If the garden of Eden really exists it does so moment by moment, fragmented and tough, cropping up like a fan of buddleia high up in the gutter of a deserted warehouse, or in a heap of frozen cabbages becoming luminous in the reflected light of a roadside snow.

– Helen Dunmore

It's not that we've been trapped by Romantic images of the child. We haven't been nearly Romantic enough.

– James R. Kincaid

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thought has been a constant presence in, and has had relevance for, literary writing ever since the emergence of the Romantic influence on literature and culture. This is especially true for fiction, and studies of fiction, centred around or featuring child characters, portrayals and examinations of childhood, and works that are directly a part of the category of children's literature.¹ Tracing the development of the concept of childhood in British and North American literature, Adela L. Catană argues that, in contrast to the preceding restrictive Puritan discourse, children came to be regarded in a more positive light in the eighteenth century, mentioning Rousseau as one who saw them as "the embodiment of purity and natural goodness" (17) and suggested that "they should be raised far from the temptations of city life and allowed to discover the world by themselves in a free, natural way rather than only reading about it" (17).

Strong examples of engaging with Romantic discourses in literary analysis are Reinhard Kuhn's *Corruption in Paradise* (1982) and Ellen Pifer's *Demon or Doll* (2000). Focusing on contemporary literature, Pifer finds, for example, that major works by authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Ian McEwan, and Don DeLillo "demonstrate the amazing resilience of the Wordsworthian child in diverse quarters of contemporary writing" (2) – the novels she discusses, *Lolita* (1955), *The Child in Time* (1987), and *White Noise* (1985), "reinvigorate the child's image by penetrating to the roots of the Romantic heritage and grafting new and vital offshoots" (234). Kuhn is interested in how the authors he studies approach the "destruction of innocence" (133), and whether they conform or not to "a pattern derived from Rousseau" (133). He argues that some, "like Jerzy Kosinski, simply ignore it. Others, like Stendhal, seem bent on wilfully denying it" (133). Indeed, Pifer finds that in "[s]tressing the child's capacity for evil, conformity, or sheer obliviousness" (235), the novels by some of the other writers she discusses, e.g., Kosinski, Golding, Lessing, Kundera, and Rushdie – "challenge, from a multiplicity of cultural vantage points, the blankly adorable child so dear to advertisers and politicians" (235). Helen Dunmore is known for her children's books as well as for her novels and poetry collections. However, compared to, for example, McEwan, she has not been awarded that much attention in the academic field and, as far as I know, there has been no examination in terms of analysing the Romantic influence in her work. In this paper I want to look at Dunmore's engagement with Rousseauian and Romantic ideas in her short fiction, namely "The Kiwi-fruit Arbour", "The Clear and Rolling Water", and "Emily's Ring" in her short story collection *Ice Cream* (2000), and, building on theoretical frameworks

provided by Pifer's and Kuhn's monographs, argue that, though apparently well aware of the Romantic legacy, Dunmore joins the group of authors who are more inclined to debunk rather than celebrate it.

In his *Confessions* (1768), Rousseau creates "the myth of Bossey and of its destruction" (Kuhn 130). Young Jean-Jacques is erroneously accused of having broken a comb and is punished for it. Rousseau identifies this situation as fatal for his childhood state:

With the above incident the tranquillity of my childish life was over. From that moment I ceased to enjoy a pure happiness, and even at the present day I feel that the recollection of the charms of my childhood ceases there. We remained a few months longer at Bossey. We were there, as the first man is represented to us – still in the earthly paradise, but we no longer enjoyed it; in appearance our condition was the same, in reality it was quite a different manner of existence. (1963a: 19)

Phrases like "the first man" and "paradise" make it evident that Rousseau refers to the biblical myth of the Garden of Eden and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from it. However, as Kuhn explains, the Bossey episode "represents a radical reinterpretation of the ancient myth of the expulsion from paradise and in its comprehensiveness assumes the status of an original and autonomous myth" (131). This is due to that "the destruction of Rousseau's paradise is an archetypal event, divorced as it is from any specific fault and emerging from an inherent culpability" (Kuhn 131). Consequently, Rousseau keeps moving from location to location, always attempting to establish the original paradise and always being driven out of it some way or the other. Nonetheless, by creating this myth, Rousseau and his philosophical impact have become a legitimate part of any literary inquiry that deals with images of gardens or similar idyllic havens such as cosy villages, secluded castles or châteaux, or even simple abodes detached from towns and cities.

Jackson Lears has noted the strong tradition of Romantic thinkers, including Rousseau and William Blake, envying children's close relations to nature and their freedom from adult constraints. For them, the child was emblematic of "freedom from social convention and utilitarian calculation" (Lears 145). Rousseau himself argued that

Nature intends that children shall be children before they are men. If we insist on reversing this order we shall have fruit early indeed, but unripe

and tasteless and liable to early decay. ... Childhood has its own methods of seeing, thinking, and feeling. Nothing shows less sense than to try to substitute our own methods for these. (1956: 122)

In *Emile* (1762), he proposes (as Henry Jenkins summarises in his introduction to *The Children's Culture Reader* (2000)), an "approach to education that linked learning to natural sensation and material consequences rather than adult instruction and regulation" (18), and wants "to preserve children's pristine moral impulses, and especially to protect children's minds from the influence of books" (18):

The mind should be left undisturbed till its faculties have developed. ... Therefore education of the earliest years should be merely negative. It consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error. ... Exercise his body, his limbs, his senses, his strength but keep his mind idle as long as you can. ... Leave childhood to ripen in your children. (1963b: 57–58)

Intuitively, it seems difficult to combine these requirements with city life, the embodiment, for the Romantics especially, of industrialism, utilitarian mechanisms, and the pressures of contemporary society.

"The Kiwi-fruit Arbour" tells the story of a sixteen-year-old Finnish girl, Ulli, who, having won a scholarship to study in Paris, spends the summer with a French family, M and Mme Colbert and their two children, Jean-Paul and Isabelle, in their countryside house, as they host such students. The narrative revolves around the fact that Ulli has found herself unexpectedly pregnant, and she contemplates her situation. What is most relevant for the present discussion, however, is that the story includes depictions of what we may term "paradise", or observe as a sort of Rousseauian haven. This is especially true for the garden of the countryside house that belongs to the family with whom Ulli stays. However, I understand there is no deliberate construction of Rousseauian "refuge" in terms of recoiling from the city or escaping the pressures of society. The house is indeed located in the countryside, and is, as the story demonstrates several times, very much suited for leisure and relaxation, but its inhabitants seem to be very much participants in the demands of contemporary, and city, life. M Colbert "stays in Paris all week and comes down at weekends smelling of the city" (*IC* 173), Jean-Paul "is a

medical student, studying surgery in Paris" (171), and Mme Colbert "teaches film studies" (172) and "writes articles in journals and gets invitations to all the film festivals" (172) which implies that she works at a university, presumably in Paris as well.

It is actually Ulli who is portrayed as a character more attuned to the Rousseauian paradigm – and I argue that Dunmore is portraying a dissolution of such faith through various encounters from among which some are more and some less successful. This paradigm is rendered in an episode midway through the story that appears to be a reminiscence in the midst of a journey to a château that is very demanding for Ulli, who is struggling with early-pregnancy sickness. "The garden is so beautiful" (*IC* 173), thinks Ulli. "Perhaps, if [she] could choose, she would never go out of it" (*IC* 173) – "she would never go out of it" is, of course, an evident rendering of a Rousseauian, and Romantic in general, desire to preserve the original paradise, or innocent paradise of childhood devoid of the realities of sex and death, as Kuhn would explicate it. "[I]f Ulli could choose" seems to render the consciousness of the fact that such choice does not truly exist, but in Rousseauian, and Romantic, terms such conditionality tends rather to express a sense of nostalgia and irrevocable loss.

The garden is indeed wonderful:

At the top of the garden there are a dozen apple trees in rough grass. The grass is wet with dew long after the rest of the garden is dry. Little hard green apples fall under the trees, too sour even to nibble. ... The grass has been cut recently, and the mowings are scattered under the trees, drying to hay, sweetened by withering clover. Beyond, there's a rising wall of green turf topped by hawthorns, then the land drops away to the fields which run down to the sea. The sky is white and wide, and the sea looks dark. You can smell it, and on one misty white day Ulli tasted its salt on the grass. (*IC* 173)

However, it is exactly here in the story where Dunmore has the character of a mower come to mow this seemingly untouched beauty and wilderness with "a big petrol mower" (*IC* 173). And not only that. The mower is also the one who tells Ulli the story of the liberation, presumably launched by the Normandy landings towards the end of World War II, which he remembers and had lived through:

He was a boy of eight, crouched in a cellar, hearing gunfire. The thing was, nobody knew what was happening. You see, at the time you don't know that this is the liberation and everything's going to be OK in a few weeks. It isn't history yet, you're just stuck in the middle of it. You see terrible explosions and those Boches tearing around the village. Someone once said there's nothing worse than an army in retreat, and now you know it's true. They're taking pot-shots round corners, they don't care who's in the way. Then they've gone, but you don't dare believe they won't be back. There's a pall of smoke so thick you can't see the men coming up out of the sea, but there are streaks of fire in the smoke and then you hear the shells landing near you, as if it's you they're after. And someone in the village goes mad and rings the church bells, but the Boches haven't gone yet and they turn round and fire at the church. You can still see the marks on the bells. We all heard the bells ring. (*IC* 174)

Afterwards, the mower hands his empty glass to Ulli, thanking her, and proceeds to "chop[ping] the grass at the top of the bank with a scythe" (*IC* 174). The story of the remembered, and therefore real, dangers of war and violence does seem to disturb Ulli, assaulting the peaceful idyll of the garden, in which she likes to "lie[] on her back and look[] up through the branches into the sky" (*IC* 173). However, without any further comment, the sense of nostalgia expressed before is repeated again after (or despite) hearing the story: "Yes, if she could choose, Ulli would stay in the garden" (*IC* 174). The Rousseauian belief seems to have survived this assault.

Nevertheless, there are two other situations that appear to challenge Ulli's romantic outlook more successfully, and I believe that Dunmore indicates both, perhaps deliberately, through the inexplicable sudden hunger of her protagonist. The first one is Ulli's encounter with a very much adult-world matter, abortion. After the episode of Ulli becoming sick during the trip to a château with Jean-Paul and Isabelle, the trio is playing cards in Ulli's room back in the Colberts' house. Isabelle, having had apparently deduced the situation, suggests: "You know, Maman, years ago, she signed the declaration that women signed, saying they had had abortions. You know the one. Lots of film stars signed it" (*IC* 179). Then there is "silence in the room. Ulli's body is like a drum, echoing to Isabelle's words. She feels purified, and far away from herself. The grammar of pregnancy recedes and recedes. It is faint now, so faint she can hardly hear it" (*IC* 179). What follows in the narrative is simply "a smell of baking bread in the house" (*IC* 180). Ulli, who by that time had

“no appetite” (*IC* 178) and used to “chop[] the food up, push[] it around her plate to make it look less” (182), now knows that “tonight she won’t have to” (182) do it. She

is starving. Her mouth prickles with saliva at the thought of a golden-crusted hot new slice of bread, with pale Normandy butter oozing through it. No honey or jam, just the tastes of butter and the bread which Isabelle’s mother has made. She’ll swallow every mouthful, and run her licked finger round the plate to pick up the last crumbs. (*IC* 182)

The second situation preceded this one and is mentioned only briefly, but it obviously is an encounter with sex. Ulli remembers a night she spent with a boy named Jorma, and although she does not use any explicit description, this is evidently the episode when she conceived the child she is now with:

His parents were away and they were alone under the wooden sky of Jorma’s bedroom. It was like having their own house. She climbed out of bed with Jorma watching her.

‘Come back to bed.’

‘I can’t, I’m starving.’

She could have eaten up the house. She had never been so hungry. (*IC* 181–82)

I understand that in this case the encounter with sex, an actual sexual experience, presumably her first, has disrupted Ulli’s previous romantic belief in which virginity is understood as a part of an innocent state that is to be protected and cherished. This has, in parallel to the previous instance, caused the sudden hunger as Dunmore includes the description of it in the passage.

The actual fate of Ulli’s pregnancy remains unnarrated. However, if she is eventually left with no other choice but abortion, despite her possible wish to keep the child, such scenario is put, in the context of repeated references to the surrounding wealth and abundance throughout the story – especially the implied affluence of Jorma’s parents – into question.

“The Clear and Rolling Water” also incorporates rather subtle encounters of children with death, sex, or other adult-world realities. However, in contrast to “The Kiwi-fruit Arbour”, these encounters are not employed to dissolve the Rousseauian paradigm for the benefit of characters. Rather, they appear

and function as a rather natural part of the child characters' lives in order to demonstrate that they are not irrevocably fatal for the state of childhood. Nevertheless, childhood is destroyed eventually, but due to conflict and failure to reconcile, rather than due to any of those realities.

Laura Foster, the protagonist and the narrator, is soon to be eleven when her narration begins. She lives with her parents in the countryside with a river flowing through it, dividing the land. Her parents own the land on one side of the river, and the Robertsons, the only neighbours there, own the land on the other.² She is friends with the Robertsons' twelve-year-old son Jamie, but they are "the only children for three miles, dropped off by the school bus together at the lane-end on Friday afternoons" (*IC* 82). They often spend time wandering the rural landscape, but the descriptions of their time there bear no semblance to the idyllic portrayals of countryside imagined in Romantic thought.

As soon as they get "beyond what either family owned" (*IC* 83), the land on either bank of the river is "uncultivated, full of bracken and furze and flies" (83). Laura remembers that often they found "sheep bones, and skulls where you could see the fit of the bone, piece to piece, like fine seaming. If it was a ram's skull we might keep it" (*IC* 83). Undoubtedly, such findings of bones and skulls reveal that the inevitable reality of death is always-present in countryside nature. At the same time, Dunmore's portrayal of children approaching these findings playfully, likening the way bones of a dead animal fit together to fine seaming, and the way they continue their childhood activities later on without change both question the possible assumption that an encounter with death is fatal for childhood. Further, a sense of danger is rendered as the river runs "more steeply, pummelling the boulders" (*IC* 83) where the children "climb[] and jump[] and balance[]" (83). "Even when the water was high and dangerous we still jumped from boulder to boulder" (*IC* 83-84), says Laura. And indeed, nature is not going to spare children merely because of the fact that they are children:

We must have slipped often, but I remember one time when I leaped and knew halfway that I'd misjudged it and would fall into the thrash of the water. But I hurled myself forward and caught at the side of the rock where it jutted. I knocked my breath out but I clung to the slippery side, sprawled across the face of the rock like a monkey, grappling it to me. Jamie hauled me up. I was on top of the rock and safe before I felt the blow the rock had given me. (*IC* 84)

This scene foreshadows the episode from the ending of the story when fifteen-year-old Laura ventures up the river with Jamie for the last time. Jamie is teaching her to dive, which she had “always been nervous of” (*IC* 93), and in her attempt she bangs herself against the side of a rock, ending up in the water half-stunned and having gashed the side of her head, which now bleeds heavily.

Jamie runs for help, but the cultivated, owned, land is not safe for him either. After a series of conflicts regarding changes in ownership of a piece of the land that resulted in Laura’s father’s resentment and eventual mental illness, seeing a boy from a family that has acquired a part of the land that used to belong to him running down his own land, he fires his shotgun at Jamie. Laura is saved only because the wounded Jamie is able to tell her mother, who runs to him, what had happened and where she is. The idea for the present argument is that nature grants no safety, not even to children, but the harm Jamie suffers is key for my concluding argument, and I will return to it shortly.

One example is especially relevant for analysing the Rousseauian paradigm in the story, an encounter with injustice, namely ridicule and bullying by a classmate in school. As mentioned before, it is precisely the encounter with evident injustice that Rousseau in the *Confessions* identifies as fatal for his childhood state. In “Clear and Rolling Water” Laura is confronted with the ridicule of her classmate Isobel Farmer who takes Laura’s pen, holds it high above her head, and jeers:

‘Ooh, Laurer Foster.’

The satin lining fell out of the box and the pen shone in Isobel’s big hand. She snatched a piece of paper, uncapped my pen, and began to write, pressing down hard. Ink spattered as the nib crossed. Isobel threw down the pen. ‘Your mum bought it off a tinker, that’s why it doesn’t write. They don’t have shops where Laura lives’. (*IC* 86)

However, instead of making fatalistic declarations about the state of childhood, Laura determines to “fight Isobel Farmer ... when I had worked out how it could be done” (*IC* 86). Eventually, Isobel becomes pregnant, and Laura “is glad of it when the boys said she was a slut and a slag and a dirty ride. There had been no need to fight her after all” (*IC* 89). In this instance, Dunmore again opposes the Rousseauian pattern, and very tangibly too as the situation she constructs comes very close to the one Rousseau records in the *Confessions*.

Thus, none of the mentioned encounters or situations is sufficient, in itself, to dismantle childhood, or “the real paradise of childhood” (143), as Kuhn would phrase it. Towards the end of the narrative, shortly before Laura’s injury and the subsequent disastrous incident on the Fosters’ land, Jamie is aiming to begin studying at a university, optimistic and realising the opportunities but, nonetheless, somewhat oblivious to the lurking danger around him – Laura’s father has already made a threat (“... if I see one of them put a foot beyond the land they’ve stole, I’ll get my shotgun” (*IC* 91)) and told Laura to warn Jamie “not to put a foot on my land” (*IC* 92). Mr Foster has indeed come to believe, at this point, that the Robertsons have stolen the Fosters’ land, which they have bought, had been described by Laura’s mother as “ill” (*IC* 92), and had been given pills by the doctor which he, however, “wouldn’t take” (92). So, Laura warns Jamie,

but I’m not sure that he took it seriously. He was too busy thinking of exams and university entrance. He had all the university brochures and he brought them to show me the different courses. We sat together on the school bus, and I looked at the glossy photographs of students in bars, or sitting at ranks of computers, or browsing in libraries. I thought of the narrow track pelleted with sheep dung, and the barbed wire, and the river.

‘You’re really going,’ I said.

‘Yes, and you will too.’

‘Will I?’

He smiled as if there were nothing more sure. (*IC* 92-93)

Despite all this optimism, however, Laura’s father does indeed attack Jamie, as mentioned above, throughout Jamie’s attempt, in fact, to save Mr Foster’s own injured daughter. However, I understand that what brings about the eventual collapse of both his and Laura’s childhood is not as much Mr Foster’s violent assault nor the injury from the gun blast, the actual loss of an eye, as the subsequent results:

It’s difficult for us to meet, with the Robertsons not wanting me on their land. And Jamie would never step on ours again. When he saw me he said my dad was a fucking maniac, and he looked at me as if something of my dad might be lodged deep inside me, too, where I couldn’t see it. (*IC* 95)

Both Jamie and his family expand Laura's father's crime to include Laura herself, who is innocent. Furthermore, Jamie obviously fails to forgive Mr Foster, a failure that prevents any more optimistic resolution or possible restoration of the lost state of childhood within the narrative.

As a result, Laura has "gone away. I didn't want the school bus, or the sixth form, or any of it any more" (*IC* 95). Not having finished school, she has got a job in town, working at an Argos outlet. She has "made friends with the girls I never really knew before, who used to sit at the back of the bus" (*IC* 95), and even with her former adversary, Isobel Farmer, who "got me a fake ID" (95). At the end of Laura's narrative, Jamie is "still there, at home" (*IC* 96). "He'll go away some time, but not yet. It takes a while, you know, to get over a thing like that" (*IC* 96), concludes Laura, but we are invited to ponder the damage that has really been done by these events and subsequent responses (or lack of responses). In this story, Dunmore portrays realities that are understood as extremely dangerous for childhood in the Rousseauian view as hardly bothering it, while at the same time she introduces other situations that ultimately bring about the complete demolition of the previous state of childhood, with the protagonist being only fifteen at that time, thus creating a two-level challenge for the Rousseauian construction.

The final example studied here, "Emily's Ring", takes us to Victorian times to the British seaside. Young Emily, a daughter of a gentleman whose previous wife, Emily's mother, died when Emily was seven and who has now remarried, is employed to supervise her six younger half-siblings, the oldest William, seven-year-old Margaret, Alice, Henry, Paul, and a baby girl Louise, who are brought to the seaside on Dr Seton's orders for convalescence after having contracted the whooping cough.

What is important for my discussion is that the Victorian era is considered to have been heavily influenced by the Romantics.³ In literary terms, for example, Pifer, discussing Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), describes the young Victorian governess of his tale as "an ardent disciple of Rousseauian faith" (46) due to her reductive perception of the children entrusted to her care, as creatures of "angelic beauty" (*Turn* 12) and absolute "innocence" (*Turn* 21), and her refusal to admit the possibility of a transgression due to which Miles, one of her wards, was dismissed from school. Dunmore, however, does not portray in Emily a struggle to recognise wickedness in children. Instead, Emily constantly finds herself in encounters with children that prove them to be anything but "angelic" or "innocent".

For example, Paul, presumably a toddler, is not allowed by Emily to go to bathe in the sea without her, unlike his older brothers William and Henry. In reaction, he curls himself “on the sand ... into a tight, furious ball” (*IC* 193) and “kicks and howls and will not let [Emily] near him” (193). Soon he “thuds his head against the sand, trying to hurt himself. He is purple” (*IC* 193). Further, completely ignorant of Victorian standards of propriety, the children undress themselves in order to bathe in the sea:

William and Henry caper, stripping off their clothes and letting them fall on the sand. The wind blows, the sun shines on their thin white bodies. Even Paul is tugging at his boots. Alice and Margaret jump up and down, their petticoats flapping. (*IC* 190-91)

Emily is disconcerted about this “shocking sight” (*IC* 191), but not due to concerns about child abuse such as we might have – in this sense, the Victorian era is, after all, “a lost, innocent age” to regret for (Hunt 45) – but because of, as already mentioned, Victorian propriety. As Emily explains: “There is no one else on the beach today, and I am glad of it because Papa wishes the children to bathe naked, and I know that many will think it indecent” (*IC* 186). However, the children are, as mentioned, oblivious to these norms.

One of the greatest struggles is baby Louise. She suffers from teething and as soon as she wakes up in the narrative, she starts screaming and does not stop till the end. Emily notes that she screams “so loud I have a headache already” (*IC* 190) and, later, that “she will make herself sick with screaming if she does not stop soon” (191). Later still, her cry has “changed, it is high, desperate, sobbing” (*IC* 192), and Emily states that she has “never known a baby as angry as Louise” (193). At a certain point, Emily puts Louise on the sand where she is silent for a moment, but then starts to scream again, and Emily entertains the idea that “I shall leave you [Louise] there. I am not going to carry you any more” (*IC* 190), but she recoils quickly: “But I know that I shall. How can I go home to Papa and Mama without Louise?” (*IC* 190). Towards the end of the narrative, however, having become even more desperate, Emily shares her desire to “run away down the beach as far as I can where there are no children any more, only water” (*IC* 193).

At the same time, in addition to portraying the non-angelic qualities of children, Dunmore employs a depiction of an admirably mature response of children, one that, however, is also possible only if we free ourselves from simplistic Romantic notions about the child. Emily possesses a ring that was

given to her by her mother at the age of seven, a year before she died. However, the ring is too small for Emily to wear now, so she only wears it around her neck on a piece of silk ribbon. "Once Papa said he would give me a silver chain to hang it upon, but Mama said that was foolish. 'The ring is much too small for her. Why can't she not give it to Margaret, or Alice?'" (IC 187). Here is the children's response:

But Margaret and Alice knew better than to set up a cry for it. They looked at me with big eyes and said nothing. They know that my own mother gave me my ring when I was seven, the same age as Margaret. (IC 187)

Finally, the fact that the children suffered the whooping cough (Emily remembers "nights when I held [Margaret] upright while she choked and whooped. Often she was sick, and I would hold the bowl for her and wipe her face with lavender water afterwards" (IC 188)) further undermines such notions like James's governess expresses when she states that "Miles had never for a second suffered" (*Turn* 29). Furthermore, like in "Clear and Rolling Water", nature again proves dangerous, even lethal, for human beings, not excluding children, as Margaret unexpectedly drowns in the sea.

To contemporary readers, exposed to the massive literature on, and media coverage of, child abuse, it may occur, at the point when Margaret disappears from the text, to aim suspicion at an unknown young man who came to play with the boys at the beach and afterwards offered to help with supervising the children, but we soon learn that Margaret has drowned. Emily's ring, which Margaret was carrying when she ventured to bathe in the sea, is found some hundred years later "*inside a fish*" (IC 185), as the framing narrative of more recent time that introduces the story informs us. We are left to ponder why a young girl, the eldest sister and the only stepchild to a mother in the family, was left to supervise six little children alone, a task so demanding that not even the voluntary help of a stranger was enough to prevent the catastrophe.

As noted in the beginning, Dunmore has proved, especially in the three short pieces discussed here, herself aware of the many aspects of Romantic, even particularly Rousseauian, thinking. In her own engagement with these ideas, she has, however, joined those authors whom Kuhn described as ignoring the pattern derived from Rousseau or even deliberately denying and questioning it. She has done so most notably by portraying encounters of children with sex, death, and other adult-world realities as not irrevocably destructive, or fatal, for the state of childhood; by depicting nature as dangerous, even lethal,

and uncompromising, even for children; and by some portrayals of children's behaviour that directly counters simplistic and reductive Romantic images of a child. Such conclusion is in line with Katherina Dodou's claim about contemporary British novelists who "have challenged the sentimentalization of childhood" (239), and about contemporary fiction that "seeks to problematize the image of the innocent child as a symbol of vulnerability, guiltlessness, and lack of knowledge" (240).⁴ However, when discussing the Romantic heritage, we should also keep in mind that originally the child image was an "active image" emphasizing the human being's 'potency'" (Pifer 46), and it only gradually became "a static symbol of 'withdrawal' from life" (46). Therefore, if we ever find ourselves stuck with passive images of children, victimised, unresourceful, or in retreat, it may also be that, as James R. Kincaid put it, it is not "that we've been trapped by Romantic images of the child. We haven't been nearly Romantic enough" (284).

Endnotes

1. For further theoretical background on the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Romantics on literary writing related to child characters and childhood see Pifer, *Demon or Doll* (2000), pp. 19–22, and Kuhn, *Corruption in Paradise* (1982), pp. 3–15, 128–34.
2. It should be noted that there is not much in the story that would frame this setting as a Rousseauian "refuge". Instead, what emerges very clearly is the ideology of private property, which especially Laura's father appears to be strongly attuned to and which is the source of eventual conflicts and disaster, and his own madness. It is beyond my present focus here to elaborate directly on the topic of private property ideology, but the children's portrayed obliviousness to it is wonderful and worth mentioning: "Sometimes we walked on one side of the river, sometimes on the other. We rarely thought about it being Robertson land or Foster land" (*IC* 83).
3. Pifer talks about "the Victorians' idealizing attitude toward children" (21–22). For further theoretical background on the Victorians' approach to childhood see, for example, Spacks, *Adolescent Idea* (1981), pp. 191–227.
4. Discussing three of McEwan's novels, Dodou argues that McEwan, who, as she observes, does employ the Romantic scenario in his works, and whom Pifer categorises as an author who "register[s] a persistent faith in childhood innocence" (2), also joins contemporary novelists in challenging the sentimentalisation of childhood and problematising the image of an innocent child.

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