Place, Narrative, and Identity in Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*

In this paper, I engage with a conversation about defining Irish identity. While some scholars look “back” to memory and the past to divulge a cohesive sense of national identity (Joe Cleary, Roy Foster, etc.), I look at new and changing places as a route to defining Irish identity in fiction, specifically Seamus Deane’s 1996 novel, *Reading in the Dark*. Namely, if the past cannot provide closure or accommodate varying identities, perhaps place can. Considering place as something the individual can navigate, record, and change allows for alterations in identity in a modernizing Ireland that looks “out” instead of “back” with increasing frequency.

This essay comes out of a longer paper in which I look at several novels by Irish authors, and argue that place and narrative work together to shape identity, forming what the anthropologist A. Jamie Saris terms a “triad…between place, person, and narrative.” Drawing on the idea of an imagined, cultural space that surrounds physical locations, I argue that narrative and storytelling provide agency for writers and characters to influence and control place, and, therefore, identity.

Before moving on, I’ll take a moment to define my use of the terms “place” and “space.” I use “place” in reference to physical locations, and I argue that place, as a confined physical area, inevitably affects and controls characters. I use “space,” however, to describe the cultural imagination’s conception of a place that figuratively surrounds a physical location. (And this second term is much more vital to my argument.)

In Seamus Deane’s, *Reading in the Dark*, a semi-autobiographical novel set in mid-twentieth-century Derry, the narrator struggles to form an identity by sifting through his family’s unclear past and the competing hegemonic forces where he lives. I see Deane as setting up contested places in which the narrator must choose the past he believes as groups in his
community attempt to impose their own narratives on cultural space. In this argument, I use Deane’s novel to show first that place often signifies identity in Irish fiction, second that the ability of characters to alter and own spaces makes room for agency in defining that identity, and third that narrative and storytelling are the tools that characters use to alter the function and cultural space of a place, and, subsequently, of an identity.

To further situate my analysis of Reading in the Dark, I am going to take a minute to summarize some of the material I use in the longer version of this paper to set up the relationship between place, narrative, and identity. In his research on a mental asylum in Sligo, A. Jamie Saris notes that the asylum has the power to permanently alter its residents. People who live there are changed, not by the community in the asylum, but by the “asylum qua physical thing.” I see his research as relevant because the same phenomenon can apply to other places and the people in them. Saris also discovers that learning stories, even conflicting stories, about the asylum “[is] both a tool and a register” for understanding the asylum’s interaction with Sligo.¹ (And this is where the power of narrative and storytelling comes in.) “Etymologies,” he says, “at once stake a claim to a particular place and a particular history…The very act of debating,” then, signals a “discourse that constitutes space through proper names, specific events, and meaningful narrative.” This debate through naming and narrative is one of the bases in my argument.

Indeed, the debates, conversations, and stories surrounding places in Reading in the Dark alter the imagined spaces of physical places. According to Catherine Nash, “within the imaginative geography of the nation, particular places, regions or landscapes are used to construct and express senses of collective history and shared senses of belonging.” In this way, national ideas of place in Ireland are in part due to the narratives about that place, no place really

¹ I take this time to mention Saris because of the connection he draws between a place and its interaction with a community; he sees “place, person, and narrative” as interdependent, and naming and storytelling as ways of controlling place by altering its cultural space.
existing except in the culturally imagined space around it, the stories. The historian Graham Dawson looks at imagined spaces around sites of trauma in Derry, and he argues that “a process of transformation and representation is at work in this making-public (or, in my own words, the telling) of collective memory.” In my argument, narrative itself is a way of altering imagined space, and narratives give characters in Reading in the Dark the opportunity to define their own spaces and identities.

As I apply this “triad” theory of place, narrative, and identity to Deane’s novel, I keep in mind that the narrator in the novel struggles amid the conflicting discourses of his largely Catholic, nationalist community and the Protestant, Unionist influences (teachers, clergymen, police) in his community. These varying discourses compete over shared and contested spaces in Derry, a town literally on the border of Northern Ireland and the Republic. In this volatile setting, the characters in the novel associate conflicting places in and surrounding Derry with stories—stories that they have the power to change. Instead of looking to past events to claim identity, therefore, refocusing on place gives the narrator control of his own spaces, and, as follows, his identity.

The issue of place and characters’ abilities to navigate space appears from early in the novel, through the mother’s imprisonment on the staircase. The first chapter shows the narrator’s mother standing on the landing in “a clear, plain, silence.” In the scene, a haunting shadow paralyzes and isolates the narrator’s mother alone on the stairs. Further, the mother’s decline into silence begins with her coming down the stairs from her father’s deathbed—and she remains on the imagined, transitory space of the staircase for the rest of the novel. The narrator insists that even after he has moved out of the house, “Her small figure at the turn of the stair…that was how I remembered her.” Her remaining in a symbolically transitional space, then, coincides with her
silence and her refusal to bury the past or disclose it, as well as a refusal to alter the narrative of a
space. The only character in the novel in whom the mother confides her narrative is Crazy Joe, a
man trapped in “the system,” in and out of a mental asylum throughout the novel. She effectively
silences her narrative with Joe, a contained, and, in any case, disreputable character, whom the
narrator describes as the one “who almost completed the story.” The narrator’s mother, then is
the example of what not to do in order to control identity—by silencing her own narrative,
imprisoning it in the liminal space of the stairs (and the enclosed space of Crazy Joe and the
asylum), she relinquishes any control over interpretation of her identity.

Further tying identity to place, a trope of disappearance occurs throughout Reading in the
Dark, beginning with a chapter in which the narrator troubles over a circus clown’s disappearing
act. I should also note here that disappearing is an issue tied to the narrator’s missing uncle and
his equally lost history (some stories describe Uncle Eddie as a deserter of the nationalist forces;
sometimes he is the betrayer, sometimes he is the betrayed)—so, the narrator’s fear for the clown
signifies worry over his uncle’s physical displacement and similarly displaced identity. In the
case of Uncle Eddie, the family’s silence prevents his true narrative from coming out—the
absence of a narrative keeps him perpetually displaced.

The Field of the Disappeared, a location couched in folk narrative, also demonstrates the
narrator’s fear of dislocation as it has the purported power to erase identity. According to the folk
story, “the birds that came toward [the field] would pass from view and then come back on either
side; but if they flew across, they disappeared.” The story gives the Field of the Disappeared
agency—the place itself causes the disappearances—and the fear surrounding the field stems
from dislocation:

There was a belief that it was here that the souls of all those from the area who had
disappeared, or who had never had a Christian burial, like fisherman who had drowned
and whose bodies had never been recovered, collected three or four times a year…to cry like birds and look down on the fields where they had been born.

Although the field as a physical place has the power to dislocate an identity, the exchange of control between people and place shows the role of storytelling in forming identity. The narrator believes in the Field of the Disappeared because “that was its name,” and it possesses the power to erase because of the narrator’s belief in its name, its story, and its imagined space. The place itself, then, has the power to dislocate an individual, but there is an important conversation between people and place in which humans impose narrative and naming in an effort to control a space. This connection signifies the narrator’s compulsion to interact with narrative in discovering and defining his identity. His larger crisis, therefore, is often frustrating because he lacks narratives that would complete the imagined spaces around the places in his community.

This shared control of identity between place and narrative becomes increasingly important in the novel as Deane’s narrator navigates the borders between Catholic nationalist and Protestant Unionist territories. In other words, it has not only to do with his family, but also his larger community. Throughout the novel, Deane sets up a contrast between dead greyness that sets up places as either grey, dead, and controlled by “the Other,” or burning, fiery, and raging against constraint. I see this dichotomy between dead greyness and dangerous fieriness in descriptions of place (and in folklore engaging with place), as representative of what Liam Harte and Michael Parker call a distaste for an imposed order and a fear of orderlessness that teems beneath the surface of contested places.

This contrast between dead, conformed spaces and contested, dangerous spaces occurs throughout the novel, from the first chapter, when the narrator’s mother “stares into the redness locked behind the bars of the range” to later, when the hearth is burst and repaired, and “the great white winter pile[s] up around the red fire again.” The contrast occurs again in his sister’s eyes,
which look like “sunken fires…inflated from the inside.” At his sister’s funeral, “the clay came up to the brim [of the grave] as though it were going to boil over. We subdued it with flowers and pressed our hands on it in farewell.” The metaphorical fire represents danger and uprising, but it also signifies the possibility of change. During the August 15th bonfires, the narrator insists: “Fire was what I loved to hear of and to see. It transformed the grey air and streets, excited and exciting.” The bonfires the narrator describes are a form of nationalist protest against largely Protestant, Unionist occupation. While Unionists might celebrate the Battle of the Boyne on July 12, the narrator’s bonfires are “like a match flare against the sky,” and they are an attempt to regain control of a space by retelling (and reimagining) its stories.

One of the most poignant moments of conflict between the dead greyness of an oppressed space and the powerful vitality of contested places is in the narrator’s description of his neighborhood in Derry:

The dismembered streets lay strewn all around the ruined distillery where Uncle Eddie had fought, aching with a long, dolorous absence. With the distillery had gone the smell of vaporized whiskey and heated red brick, the sullen glow that must have loomed over the crouching houses like an amber sunset. Now, instead, we had the high Gothic cathedral and its parochial house, standing above the area in permanent greystone winter overlooking the abandoned site that seemed to me a faithless and desolate patch, rinsed of its colour, pale and bald in the midst of the tumble of small houses, unpaved streets and the giant moraine of debris that had slid from the foot of the city walls down the sloping embankment to where our territory begin.

In the passage, the cathedral is settled and inactive, “pale and bald,” “abandoned,” and “desolate,” while the distillery is “heated” with a “glow…like the amber sunset.” The shift from the distillery to the cathedral, from fire and warmth to desolation, signals a subjugation of Catholic nationalist forces and the sterilization of the distillery as a culturally alive, imagined space.
The narratives surrounding these volatile contested spaces allows for alterations in the
story, alterations that lead to actual change of an imagined space. The power of narrative to
change is apparent in the story the narrator inherits regarding a park that once site of conflict.

We were told never to play in the park at night, for Daddy Watt’s ghost haunted it, looking
for revenge for the distillery fire that had ruined him. Those who saw him said he was just
a black shape that moved like a shadow around the park, but that the shape had a mouth
that opened and showed a red fire raging within (33).

The story is a tool for altering cultural landscape. The distillery fire, which occurred during a
battle between Catholic nationalist forces and Protestant Unionists, represents a Protestant
victory over the narrator’s community. The story changes the imagined landscape of the park,
giving Catholic nationalists power to seek revenge with “a red fire raging within.”

These examples have had to do with a larger community, a cultural identity. The narrator
also interacts on a more personal level with the malleability of imagined spaces. His house is “all
cobweb tremors. No matter where I walked, it yielded before and settled behind me.” Indeed, the
narrator learns that he must make choices between what stories he believes, and has a role in
interpreting his community’s narratives. To avoid entrapment on the stairs with his mother, he
must take his place in forming the cultural landscapes of his community, or escape “over the
bridge into the safety of really foreign territory, the estrangement of Protestants with their bibles
and the ache of the railway line curving away towards Coleraine, Portstewart, Belfast.” Which,
indeed, is what he does in going to Belfast for college, before returning home at the end of the
novel.

Another pivotal scene, the episode of the roses, shows the narrator interacting on personal
level with cultural landscape. In a fit of fury at his parents’ silence regarding his family’s history,
the narrator literally unearths his father’s rose garden. After the tantrum, the narrator’s father
covers the roses over with cement, and “walking on that concreted patch where the bushes had
been was like walking on hot ground below which voices and roses were burning, burning.”

When his father imposes his own order on the landscape again, covering the destroyed bushes with cement, the narrator sees an alternate narrative of place raging beneath the ground. As Harte and Parker write,

In a culture where Otherness continues to function as a haunting presence within definitions of identity, often inducing uncertainty and a profound sense of threat, much contemporary writing both replicates this tense introspectiveness and exhibits a strong desire to reach beyond this state.

And in my reading, that is what I see the episode of the roses doing for the text—it shows the narrator’s simultaneous entanglement in his cultural landscape and a deep need to move beyond the encapsulation of his family and his community.

This personal level of choice is most explicit in the scene from which Reading in the Dark takes its name. In the scene, the narrator is not so much reading as rereading. With a novel in his room at night, he “senses the incoming fire, the choices hurtling faster out of Loyola’s Babylon, Jerusalem, homing in.” His choices are from conflicting narratives, conflicting interpretations of the past. He associates his reading with the farmhouse, a site of mystery and trauma in the novel in which two of the narrator’s aunts were forced to sleep as children—a place, presumably, where his uncle was executed. It becomes a locus of interaction between memory and narrative. The narrator “dreamed of the farmhouse,” and when he is rereading in the dark, “all the sounds of the seasons entombed that imagined farmhouse.” It seems to have its own cinema and scenery, “like the background where [he] lay with an open book.” Indeed, the narrator must learn to absorb narratives of place, but also to impose his own story if he wants agency over his own identity. Although he must engage with a fluid, shifting, imagined space, the very malleability of the cultural imagination makes room for him to impose his own narrative, to define his own space. Instead of remaining on the stairs like his mother, “haunted.”
with her story “locked and unlocked in the asylum at Gransha,” he must engage with narratives to gain control over his identity.

As I mentioned, this interpretation of *Reading in the Dark* comes from a longer paper that examines similar intersections of place, narrative, and identity. My goal here is to spark a conversation about the way narrative can be an opportunity for healing and change in contested places. In an Ireland filled with contested places, narratives of space are avenues for moving forward without erasing or neglecting the past, and allowing for the incorporation of previously marginalized groups. When Graham Dawson considers the power of narrative to change imagined space, he concludes, “Only when memories have been woven together into a narrative which is both widely held and publicly expressed do they have the power to secure political effects.” As Irish literature transforms, looking out rather than back, novelists have the opportunity to create narratives that reconstruct cultural, imagined spaces in a modernizing Ireland, thereby influencing Irish identity.