

**“Embarking, Not Dying”: Clare Boylan’s *Beloved Stranger* as *Reifungsroman***

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This chapter reads Clare Boylan’s *Beloved Stranger* (1999) as an example of the recently emerged genre of the *Reifungsroman*, or novel of ripening. In doing so it argues that Boylan’s novel about seventy-five-year-old Lily Butler counteracts the cultural myth of ageing as a narrative of decline without denying its validity. In fact, it is precisely her elderly husband Dick’s mental and physical decline, and eventual death, that forces Lily to review her own life and embark on a difficult journey toward self-discovery, renewal and liberation. Initially, Lily is presented as a character not at all unhappy with her life. She has settled into an apparently comfortable routine with her retired husband in their Dublin home and, when her daughter Ruth questions the happiness of her parents’ marriage, Lily insists: “We need each other. We’re halves of the same part. It’s nothing you could write a book about. We’re old pals, Ruth” (Boylan 7). This quiet routine, however, is shattered when Dick is diagnosed with bipolar disorder, showing “signs of severe paranoid delusion” (Boylan 59). After the crisis culminates and Dick threatens his wife at gun point, he is put in the care of a mental institution and later a home for the elderly. This situation unhinges not only his own, but also his wife’s and daughter’s lives. Both women are prompted to reassess their life stories and for both this process will be one of self-awareness and growth, ultimately leading to a closer mother-daughter bond and a hopeful future.

Lily’s journey is inextricably entwined with the lives of her husband and daughter, whose stories impact on and serve as a foil to her own. In fact, a case could be made that *Beloved Stranger* comprises three novels in one; while Dick’s story is representative of the narrative of decline, Ruth’s story might be said to exemplify what Gullette has termed the “midlife women’s progress novel” (1997, 77). Through their individual developments, the two female

characters also redefine the mother-daughter relationship in terms of what Woodward calls “a model of generational continuity” (1999b, 153). Nevertheless, Lily’s development remains at the heart of the novel. Thus, after briefly outlining the most important features of the *Reifungsroman*, this chapter will analyse Lily’s multi-faceted and intimate psychological journey inward and backward in time as an example of fictional life review. In doing so, it will show how the reader is made to share Lily’s rich inner life, which is not only well worth “writing a book about,” but complicates conventional notions of the protagonist’s identity as wife, widow and elderly mother as well as the concept of ageing as a linear narrative of decline.

As Susan Watkins notes, “the conventional age narrative (and one that is often used by male authors) is one of decline accompanied by nostalgia for past glories” (2013, 224).<sup>1</sup> This traditional decline narrative is challenged by the *Reifungsroman*, a term coined by Barbara Frey Waxman to describe a new type of novel in which “an aging heroine grapples with aging’s problems while also finding in old age opportunities for true *reifung*, or ripening, of intellect and spirit” (1993, 28). Accordingly, this type of novel foregrounds the ageing, often female protagonist’s “quest of self-knowledge, self-development, and a role for the future” (Waxman 1990: 16). Taking her cue from May Sarton’s “optimistic concept of ‘ripening toward death in a fruitful way,’” Waxman argues that this *Bildungsroman* of the second half of life not only opposes “its central tenet to the usual notion of deterioration in old age” but also “rejects negative cultural stereotypes of the old woman and aging, seeking to change the society that created these stereotypes” (1990, 2). Waxman’s exploration of the genre in her seminal study *From the Hearth to the Open Road* (1990) focuses on works by North American and British writers, most notably Doris Lessing, Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, May Sarton and Margaret Laurence. These writers, alongside Penelope Lively and Angela Carter, also feature in later studies by Brennan (2005) and King (2013). The genre has been less popular in the Irish literary

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, John Updike’s *Toward the End of Time* (1997), Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) and *Everyman* (2006) or Martin Amis’ *The Pregnant Widow* (2010).

context, where older women in fiction tend to bear symbolic overtones and often feature in narratives of decline.<sup>2</sup> Boylan's novel, a fictionalised account of her own parents' relationship<sup>3</sup>, provides a noteworthy exception that adds some additional facets to the generic features of the *Reifungsroman*.

*Reifungsromane* often involve either real or internal journeys. In the latter case, the protagonists experience the past through frequent recollections, reminiscences and dreams. Through these internal travels they come to terms with the past and, crucially, "try to chart a new course either into or through old age, which they embark on at the end of the work" (Waxman 1990, 17). Often, these explorations of the characters' past take the form of life review, a geriatric concept defined by Robert Butler as a "naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experience, and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts are surveyed and reintegrated" (1963, 66). While Butler considers the life review as a process occurring naturally and automatically in elderly or terminally ill people faced with the prospect of "dissolution and death" (1963, 66), writers of *Reifungsromane* employ the concept less rigidly. Nevertheless they maintain the emphasis on life review's therapeutic potential, as the "dialogue between past and present selves [...] makes it possible for the subject to see the experience of change as constructive" (King 2013, 101). At the end of the novel the protagonists typically "have become revitalized, newly self-knowledgeable, self-confident, and independent before they move forward" (Waxman 1990, 17). Ultimately, as Waxman notes, the protagonists "develop and expand more as they grow old than they did as they grew up – or perhaps they truly grow up at last" (1990, 17). In this

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<sup>2</sup> Recent examples include Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015) and Joseph O'Connor's *Ghost Light* (2010), the latter of which is analysed in Margaret O'Neill's chapter in this collection.

<sup>3</sup> The autobiographical background of *Beloved Stranger* is provided in Clare Boylan's obituary from 2006 in *The Telegraph*. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1518643/Clare-Boylan.html>

sense, the genre of the *Reifungsroman* contributes to a positive conception of ageing in terms of “growth and change” rather than “decline” (Woodward 1999a, xiii).

Often the protagonist’s actual and inner journeys are linked. This is also the case in Boylan’s novel in which Lily undertakes a number of short but crucial trips as well as more extensive internal journeys into the past. In many of the examples discussed by Waxman these inner journeys are conveyed by means of a confessional first-person narrator or a third-person narrative point of view described as “limited omniscient, confined to the elder in a youthful world” (1990, 16). In contrast, *Beloved Stranger* offers three closely interwoven, constantly shifting third-person narrations so that Lily’s perspective is complemented by that of her elderly husband and her middle-aged daughter. Memories are further evoked in the form of dialogues and shared reminiscences. Arguably, this type of narration reinforces one of the central aims of the *Reifungsroman* as defined by Waxman, namely dissolving barriers between constructed categories such as young and old or real and imagined (1990, 17). The exchange of reminiscences between Lily and younger characters also furthers what Rosario Arias Doblaz identifies as the two core elements of the process of ripening, namely “forging links with the younger generation and the recapitulation of past experience” (2005, 8).

At the start of the novel the reader learns that Lily and Dick, who have lived in the same neighbourhood for almost fifty years, were “such a familiar sight that people scarcely noticed them” (Boylan 4). However, each being “in the care of the other” (Boylan 4), neither Dick nor Lily are fully aware of their social invisibility. Lily is looking after the household and Dick is assisting her with health issues, such as her ingrown toenail, or accompanying her to the shops and to church. It soon becomes obvious that all is not well though. Early in the novel, Dick is showing first signs of illness as manifested in his secretive and increasingly strange behaviour. For instance, Lily discovers that he keeps a gun in their bedroom with which he threatens to kill both his wife and himself. It becomes obvious that he has not been able to settle into old age

and find a fulfilling new role for himself after his retirement. Dick himself articulates this insight while pointing the gun at his wife:

No one expects their life to change. No man does. [...] I am not an old man either. Not old, merely a prisoner inside this rotting cage, having to stand by helpless while his manliness is spat upon and kicked to the ground, and his obedient wife slopes away to be replaced by a nanny who treats him like a pet dog. (Boylan 50)

This passage shows the extent to which Dick has internalised patriarchal role models, including his traditional position as head of household, breadwinner and protector, and how deeply incompatible these roles are with his current situation as elderly and increasingly frail pensioner. Accordingly, as Brooke Allan notes, *Beloved Stranger* is only superficially “a book about madness; in reality it is a book about marriage and family, and the function of the mania is simply to underscore, intensify, the patterns that have been there all along. The illness reveals Dick’s true nature without distorting it [...] and the countless unspoken problems are thrown into sudden and disconcerting relief” (2001, n.p.). These “unspoken problems,” however, point to a broader social context, highlighting the damaging consequences that rigid gender conventions, such as those enshrined in the 1937 Irish Constitution and permeating Irish society throughout the twentieth century, can entail for an individual family.

Partly due to his disease, partly due to his inability to come to terms with his ageing process and find a new role not determined by economic and sexual power, Dick fails to complete a successful life review. Thus, when he revisits Lily’s and his shared past with the help of their old photo album, he fabricates a romantic tale of courtship that evades all problems of their later married and family life. Moreover, his attempts to ignore his old age lead him to re-enact scripts of romance and sexuality which he firmly associates with youth and which are therefore doomed to failure. This failure, in turn, brings to light Dick’s internalisation of misogynist views. He slights his wife by stating “You can’t have a good time with an old woman” (Boylan 243) or torments her with his *idée fixe* that Lily is having a sexual affair with the much younger Tim Walcott, a gay psychiatrist with whom both Ruth and Lily develop a

friendship. At the climax of the crisis he tries to set fire to both his wife and the house while resorting to derogatory stereotypes associated with older women: “Nobody wants to come to the house of an old man who is married to a hag, a shrew. [...] I can smell you. I could smell you when we were dancing. The whole place stinks of your unwashed body. There is nothing left for me to do but to burn the whole bloody place down” (Boylan 132; 133). These manic “episodes” (Boylan 241) are contrasted with Dick’s continual decline in health as well as his poignantly described moments of fear, confusion and alienation. Shortly before his death Lily gently reminds her husband of his old age, and Dick’s reaction succinctly sums up the narrative of decline exemplified by his story: “Then it’s all over. The game’s up. [...] You get old and then you die – that’s it, isn’t it” (Boylan 243).

While Dick’s story exemplifies the narrative of ageing as decline, for Lily the crisis caused by his illness provides an opportunity to undergo a liberating, if painful, process of ripening and growth. In contrast to her husband, Lily, after a lifetime of compromises and self-denial, has had less difficulty settling into old age. Early on in the novel, she muses about the passage of time and the various selves she has accumulated over the years:

‘I’m seventy-five,’ she thought. ‘How did I get to seventy-five?’ The people she had been were all still inside her, very neatly packaged. She used to imagine that old age must be awful, the death of everything. But it wasn’t so. Nothing died. The child and the young girl and the mother and the middle-aged woman full of rage and grief and dawning wisdom were there all together, and she reigned as peacemaker over this tribe. She understood them now and knew they had done their best. (Boylan 19)

This insight at the beginning of the novel suggests that Lily is at peace with old age, envisioning this phase of her life as a time of wisdom and reconciliation. Having maintained a sense of continuity between her younger selves and her present self, she does not resent the visible signs of ageing, and only focuses on her bodily changes when they cause her discomfort; in one scene, for instance, she is amazed at the “hoofed extension” (Boylan 9) of her toes. As her daughter Ruth reflects: “Lily never thought about her appearance. [...] She had been a lovely-looking woman but hadn’t minded getting old. Old age was a fine excuse to wear comfortable clothes”

(Boylan 85). Accordingly, unlike other *Reifungsromane*, the novel does not contain any mirror scenes in which Lily gazes at her own reflection, feeling detached from her aged body.<sup>4</sup> Old age, to her, is not a “mask or disguise concealing the essentially youthful self beneath” (Featherstone and Hepworth 379), but it is part of the identity she has grown into and that still contains her former selves. During the brief spell in which Lily and Dick experience what their daughter describes as “crazy love affair” (Boylan 85), triggered by the perusal of their photo album, we learn that Lily “didn’t feel self-conscious about being old, or about him being old and talking in this heartfelt way. The girl with the big breasts and modest legs was still inside her, she had always known that. And if she had been insecure then, she was insecure now. Let her have her romance at full volume. Better late than never” (Boylan 98). For a while, Lily thrives in this blissful fantasy. She experiences a second spring when she is ‘dating’ Dick during his hospital sojourn, remembering “with pleasure that it was a visiting day” (Boylan 94).

However, while Lily enjoys Dick’s reminiscences, his romantic tale is at the same time subverted by her own spontaneous recollections, which she can’t share and hardly admits to herself as they call into question her entire life story. In Lily’s early years *Bildung* did not take place because she simply followed the script, living her life according to the social conventions and rules of her time. For a young woman in 1950s Dublin this meant getting married and raising a family. In this sense Allan’s description of Lily as “product of a pre-feminist age” is accurate (2001, n.p.). Lily becomes acutely aware of her youthful lack of reflection and growth as she is leafing through the pages of her old photo album. At first she eagerly joins Dick on his “fascinating journey” into their early courtship days: “The surprise of seeing their young selves there, pristine under dust, was like finding some delicate flower in a neglected part of the garden. She could not tell if the past had been as Dick said. If not, it should have been” (Boylan 98). However, despite her eagerness to share Dick’s idealised tale of their courtship,

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<sup>4</sup> For the importance of mirror scenes in the *Reifungsroman*, cf. Brennan 2005, 24-25 and Waxman 1990.

Lily ultimately remains detached from his version of the past and even her own younger self, unable to “remember the details of each date as he could, nor the feelings he described. She couldn’t even clearly recall the girl in the picture. It was like looking at an old cigarette ad” (Boylan 96). The fact that Lily detaches herself from her own image by likening her younger self to a girl in “an old cigarette ad” throws into relief Dick’s and Lily’s very different views of the past. Accordingly, even at this relatively early stage of Dick’s illness and despite the second spring they briefly enjoy together, Lily’s own memories continually seep in and can’t be suppressed. These memories tell a different story from the one constructed by Dick, most crucially when she recalls a moment shortly before their marriage when “a thought swooped in like a pirate. *I don’t want to marry him.* It was such an awful thought that she couldn’t bear to consider it. Was it him, or did she just not want to marry?” (Boylan 97-98). As Susan Sontag rightly points out, “[a] way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir” (1979, 9). Lily’s recollections may be elicited by the photographs, yet they focus on her undocumented emotional history that runs counter to the more photogenic “souvenirs” of the past.

Lily’s disconcerting memories confirm Ruth’s doubt that her mother “had ever really been happy in her early married life” (Boylan 86). This suspicion is increasingly shared by the reader as the alternative history of Lily’s and Dick’s marriage gradually emerges through Lily’s spontaneous recollections and reminiscences. Even before their journey into the past, Lily’s occasional recollections of their early married life suggest the extent to which her marriage thwarted her own potential and growth. Thus, Lily recalls how Dick forcefully prevented her from returning to her office job, even though her “office days [...] had been among the happiest of her life” (Boylan 23). Firmly insisting on Lily’s exclusive role as housewife and mother, Dick simultaneously denied her ‘luxuries’ such as central heating or a washing machine. Similarly, it becomes obvious that Lily’s sexual desire has been stifled throughout her marriage.

Returning from a trip to the local stores with Dick she recalls how fifty years ago they had made love in a doorway while sheltering from the rain, and she realises: “That was the only time she had been swept away in the way she read about in novels” (Boylan 3). However, owing to Dick’s “prudish side” (Boylan 3), they never discussed each other’s needs and wishes so that sex became an act of unpleasurable duty on Lily’s part. A number of sex scenes in the novel describe how Lily feels how “his old bones clamped around her” (Boylan 29) or how “she sighed as silently as possible as she was butted on the iron mattress” (Boylan 119). While in the earlier scene Lily distracts herself by musing that she “mostly hadn’t cared for sex” (Boylan 29), in the later scene she admits to herself that her husband has never “been a good lover” (Boylan 119). These remarkable scenes belie what Sandberg calls the “longstanding history that dissociates sexuality and later life” (2015, 219) in that sexuality is presented as a persistent yet increasingly troubling aspect of Lily’s and Dick’s relationship. At the same time, Lily’s continuing curiosity about sexual matters – for instance, she repeatedly reflects on and even mentions to her daughter how she once walked in on a couple engaged in oral sex in a sauna – suggests that this lack of interest is caused less by her old age than by her own impoverished marital intimacy.

While Lily’s life has been defined by compromises and self-denial, then, Dick’s hospital sojourn provides her with the opportunity to enjoy both romance and a life of her own. According to Ruth, she “had at last achieved the perfect existence – a life entirely free of compromise. She did not have to live with a man and yet she wasn’t alone. [...] Whenever she saw Pa it was at the fever pitch of courtship. And then she went home again” (Boylan 86). Ruth also notices a visible change in her mother’s personality: “She was growing sleek and almost assertive. She no longer felt the need to please or justify” (Boylan 99). The difference between what Ruth refers to as “old Ma” versus “new Ma” (Boylan 100) is caused by Lily’s sudden freedom to live her life the way she wants, at liberty to neglect her household chores, to eat simple food and read the books she is interested in, the latter mainly feminist works ranging

from Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* to Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, an interest first sparked by the small library Ruth left behind two decades ago and one that Lily pursues not so much in order to change her life as "to make sense of it" (Boylan 93). This blissful state, however, is dramatically disrupted when Dick's condition takes a turn for the worse during his stay home for Christmas, and it is precisely Lily's feminist books that become a target for his fury when he tries to set fire to the books, the house and his wife. This traumatic event disrupts Lily's life and causes her to temporarily exchange her home for a squalid "ghost room, totally devoid of history or memory" (Boylan 147). Interestingly, her escape to this bedsitter in an anonymous building block not far from her own neighbourhood is likened to a teenager's first flight from home: "She had done an awful thing. She had run away. [...] What would her daughter think? She felt like a teenager giving trouble to a parent" (Boylan 147). Throughout the novel seventy-five-year-old Lily is repeatedly likened to a child, for instance when Dick tells his daughter that Lily is "a child, always had every decision made for her" and that she is therefore "not able to look after herself" (Boylan 155). It is thus not surprising that the horror of her own dependent state begins to dawn on Lily in her new surroundings: "What have I done with my life? Why have I no money, no courage, no life of my own? She was like a child being sent to the shops with messages, not quite understanding the money that had been put into her fist" (Boylan 169). Simultaneously, associating Lily's escape from home with a teenager's first independent steps serves to destabilise clear-cut notions of the life-course and suggests the prospect of growth.

Accordingly, Lily's bedsitter experiences provide her with a valuable first sense of independence. Even when she has difficulty unlocking the gate that leads to her flat and fears a passer-by has stolen her handbag, she refuses to give up her newly gained freedom by calling Ruth, who "would take over her life, destroy this little, bitter scrap of independence she had found for herself" (Boylan 151). Before the outbreak of Dick's illness, Lily had been sheltered in the close, if restrictive, embrace of her marriage, symbolised by the tight grip of his arm

around her at night. Now she has to face everyday challenges on her own. She also has to grapple with a new experience of isolation, loneliness and lack of money. While Lily's isolated and economically strained condition is only temporary, it evokes what Brennan calls "the spectre of the penniless older woman" (2005, 33). Lily tries in vain to make contact with her neighbours, for instance a young single mother whose small child she offers to babysit only to be rudely rejected. She also feels vulnerable, exposed to the gaze of a male stranger who occupies the converted garage opposite her apartment. Increasingly isolated and socially invisible in her bedsitter, with only the company of a mouse that she befriends, feeds and talks to, Lily begins to drink to "take the edge off her loneliness" (Boylan 166) and eventually attempts to commit suicide by taking an overdose of painkillers. The liminal state in which Lily finds herself during this phase of her life forces her to face uncomfortable truths about herself, such as the following:

'I've lied to Ruth. All the talk about marriage! In fact, I used to envy single women. I used to think it must be lovely for a woman to have her own income and no one to tell her what to do. I always imagined single women hadn't any worries. [...] I never imagined them short of money or growing old alone in a room like this, day after day, year upon year, with no human touch and no one to talk to.' (Boylan 185)

Shortly after her failed suicide attempt, the building block catches fire and Lily saves her neighbour's neglected baby from the burning house. Zamorano Llena interprets this act as a symbol of Lily's completed *Bildung*. While the fire caused by Dick forces Lily out of her home to begin a re-examination of her own life, "[h]er *Bildung* comes full circle with the fire that burns down the block of apartments. [...] In a Phoenix-like image, Lily emerges from the collapsing building with a baby that she has risked her life to save in her arms, and which becomes the symbol of Lily's new life emerging out of the ashes" (2004, 193).

This interpretation is appealing in its sense of neat symbolic closure. However, while the fire and Lily's return home after a prolonged hospital sojourn are important steps in her process of recovery and ripening, there is still a long way ahead before Lily's insights about

what she considers her wasted life (cf. Boylan 185) can be transformed into a positive vision for the future. It is only when Lily starts sharing her reminiscences with others such as Tim Walcott or her daughter Ruth that a healing process can set in and reconciliation with the past can occur. This process is anything but clear-cut and complicated by an array of contradictory emotions. Thus, when Lily returns home from hospital, she feels frustrated by her house, where “the face of marriage became her own face, feeding off her life and energy until she was old and used up and calmed down” (Boylan 208). On the other hand, her short excursion into the world of the less privileged makes her aware of the blessings of having a family and a home: “And family life, she thought, in spite of its wars and waste, was all there was. What would she do without Ruth to take her home from hospital and turn on her electric blanket? What if there was no Dick to act as a mirror to her vanished life?” (Boylan 212).

Lily also has to grapple with Dick’s death, which occurs shortly after her return home, and which leaves her full of conflicting emotions ranging from grief to anger. Her initial reaction is a sense of liberation, expressed by a significant dream in the night after his death, in which a priest tells her to “[g]o in peace” as her marriage “is ended.” The dream seems to restore Lily’s youth, promising a bright future full of opportunities: “When she went out the sun was shining. She walked away on high-heeled shoes and realised that she was young again; she was a young girl and she was free. Her body and her spirits were buoyant and her whole life was ahead of her” (Boylan 252). Even though Lily’s physical youth cannot be restored and she soon realises that she will have to work through her grief for Dick, she still feels “light and euphoric” even after waking. Despite simultaneously feeling “a rush of pain,” her dominant emotion is relief: “‘I’m free,’ she thought. The notion swam into her, seductive and profane. The marriage is ended” (Boylan 252). In order to successfully complete her life review and embark on a new life, however, Lily needs to reconcile herself with past choices and conflicts. She thus spends the time following Dick’s death withdrawing from her daughter and friends, restlessly “navigating the underworld” (Boylan 264) in order to “find the happy memories and gather

them in” (Boylan 259). However, she is increasingly filled with anger and frustration as “[h]er only memories were of the cruelty and chaos of his recent behaviour” (Boylan 259-260). Moreover, she is haunted by Dick’s ghost who climbs into bed with her at night in what Ruth considers “vivid dreams” and what Lily feels are “supernatural experiences” (Boylan 278).

Lily’s relationship to Ruth plays a key role both in her recovery and in her process of ripening. Thus, her recovery is facilitated by a weekend in Nice spent together with her daughter. During this regenerative trip “Ruth marvelled at Ma’s healing powers, her childish curiosity and willingness to be pleased” (Boylan 284). While Lily is once more likened to a child, this time the comparison suggests openness to new experience rather than dependence. The short journey also contrasts with an earlier weekend trip seaside resort out of season she had undertaken with Dick at the start of his illness and during which Lily’s own sense of happiness mainly seemed to be prompted by his: “‘I’ve never seen him look so happy,’ she thought, and then with surprise, ‘I’m happy too.’ It had been a memorable weekend, a glowing time, an autumn blaze” (Boylan 29). However, during Lily’s first trip abroad, carefully organised by her daughter, she spends a weekend she really enjoys, confiding to Ruth that her father never really understood her dreams, one of which was to travel: “Do you think if I hadn’t married Pa I’d have got to see the world?” (Boylan 282). The two contrasting weekend trips, then, bring into sharp relief the inner distance that Lily has covered in the course of her journey.

Lily’s willingness and ability to embark on a new course of her life is shown when she decides to use the free space in Dick’s photo album for the holiday photos with Ruth. Looking at the pictures, she sees “for the first time that there were similarities between herself and her daughter. They had the same frank gaze, an ironic edge to their smile. Had that developed over the years, through common understanding?” (Boylan 289). Busying herself with the photos, she also realises “that an hour had passed, a pleasant and absorbing hour in which self-pity and anxiety played no part” (Boylan 289). Prompted by this realisation, Lily returns to the photos from her younger years:

Like a diver coming on sunken treasure, she plunged, turning back to the early pages. [...] She traced her own features – unconsciously beautiful, selfish, hopeful. She had never lived. She had seized the first good thing that came her way, Dick Butler’s unconditional worship. She had been seeking herself in Dick – an acceptable, lovable version of herself. She felt a rush of forgiveness for her young self. (Boylan 289)

Her forgiveness extends to her husband’s younger self as she tries to imagine Dick’s hopes and struggles. This journey back in time completes Lily’s life review in that she not only comes to terms with past choices but re-evaluates her life in such a way that she discovers meaning and purpose in her marriage: “Going through the pictures she was surprised how right they looked together, the boy and girl, Lily and Dick. [...] She felt strongly now that they had been put together for some purpose. That notion had not struck her before. It had all seemed random and blurred” (Boylan 290). This insight into a purposeful meaning of their shared life story is a turning point for Lily, which finally allows her to come to terms with her past and to let go of her dead husband. When she falls asleep shortly afterwards, Dick visits her a final time and while his former visits had been terrifying, defined by Dick’s cold touch and his unwanted sexual demands on her, this time she desires the intimacy that she had only endured before: “‘Could you put your arms around me, Dick?’ His hands were warm. He was still old but he had the freshness of a boy. Warmth and light enfolded her. ‘Don’t go yet’, she appealed. The stiff, sour feeling of grief dissolved as she clung to him. She felt light as summer” (Boylan 291).

Lily’s completion of her life review is assisted and accompanied by her forging of cross-generational friendships. One of these friends is Tim Walcott, the psychiatrist who assists Ruth and Lily throughout the course of Dick’s illness. It is Tim who sums up the value of their friendship: “She was anybody’s fancy, really, but he liked her. Maybe mad old Dick was right to be jealous. She was nearly half a century older than him and he had never got to grips with women anyway, but it was a rare thing to find a person of any age or sex with whom you could be honest and at ease” (Boylan 199). Most important, however, is Lily’s relationship with Ruth. Ruth’s story is closely interwoven with Lily’s and serves as a foil to her mother’s. Having

suffered from her father's domestic tyranny and her mother's perceived subservience, Ruth left her family home early to become a successful architect. Now in her early forties she enjoys the pleasurable life of a well-off single woman with good friends and occasional lovers. Her process of ripening in the novel includes coming to terms with her childhood and adolescence, both of which impacted negatively on her conception of family life. In one of the mirror scenes that mark the development of Ruth throughout the novel, she muses about the fact that her decision to "let her appearance go" is in part a reaction to her mother's restricted way of life. Looking at herself in the mirror, Ruth sees "greying hair, that forbidding look women get when they think too much. She didn't lack confidence. She had a successful career, she had lovers and she knew she could get a husband if she put her mind to it, but years of looking at Ma had led her to believe that pretty women were like a rabbit in trap" (Boylan 15). As Zamorano Lena observes, the mother-daughter relationship is "marked by the generational gap, but most especially by the feminist age and the disruption of social and cultural constructs of femininity with the consequent alterations on the course and expectations of women's lives" (2004, 181). While this is true, in the course of the novel mother and daughter move closer to each other as Ruth understands that Lily has not chosen, but rather has been forced into, the role of the traditionally minded housewife. This recognition is partly brought about by shared reminiscence, for instance when Ruth learns that Lily, after reading the feminist books left behind by her daughter, "had felt angry and cheated of her life" and had walked out on her husband. Planning to start a new life in England, Lily had been "quite excited" (Boylan 210) but ultimately returned home to continue her life with Dick. As Ruth is beginning to see her mother in a different light and finds a way to reconcile herself with her dead father, she is able to move forward with her own life and open up to others, for instance Tim Walcott, with whom she decides to raise a family. Ruth's reconciliation with the past and the strengthened bond with her mother manifests itself in her changed outward appearance, including her use of make-up and a new hairstyle:

“She was quite pleased with the end result. It wasn’t exactly a transformation, it was a truce. She had given up her battle. She was no longer at war with the world” (Boylan 303).

At the end of the novel, generational conflict has given way to “generational continuity” in which “three generations are linked to each other through a heritage of care for the next generation” (Woodward 1999b, 153). For the first time, Lily realises that Ruth, from whom she had been quite estranged at the start of the novel, is in many ways similar to herself and might turn into her woman friend. Conversely, Ruth, who “had always assumed that being grown-up meant being free of your family,” now understands that “there was a sequel, that getting older brought a need to rediscover your source” (Boylan 292). In a similar vein, Ruth’s pregnancy is presented in terms of generational continuity. Significantly, Ruth realises that she is pregnant while she and her mother are visiting Dick’s grave. The symbolically fraught setting of the cemetery in winter appears to Ruth as “the perfect venue for her tidings” because “[i]f any news were to matter to the dead, it must be that life goes on” (Boylan 309). It is Lily’s reasoning, however, which provides the ironic conclusion to the novel when she abruptly informs her daughter that the unborn child will be “your father, coming back” (Boylan 309). This sense of intergenerational connectedness, ultimately replacing the narrative of decline with a cyclical model of time, is also encapsulated in Ruth’s vision of a new housing project called Ocean Village, which she has developed in the spirit of intergenerational community and which is to “incorporate a row of retirement cottages into a smart new townhouse scheme” informed by the insight that it is “neither safe nor natural for children to grow up with no elderly people around” (Boylan 200). Accordingly, the positive vision offered in Boylan’s novel is grounded in a notion of family life and cross-generational bonding. While Lily’s tentative travels, her late-life romance with Dick and her experiences in the bedsitter gesture at alternative possibilities, the plot thus ultimately returns to the more conventional mother/grandmother narrative. In this narrative, however, Dick, representative of outdated patriarchal values, is replaced by the boyish and gentle Tim, and the traditional nuclear family is radically reimagined.

Within these parameters, moreover, Boylan paints a picture of Lily as an intellectually curious, courageous and independent woman, whose potential to grow and enjoy life has just begun to come into its own at the end of the novel. As Lily realises shortly after Dick's death, "deep inside she would be sustained by the seed of her own life, reaching up for the light. There wasn't much left of her life, but it was money unspent" (Boylan 252). This potential is captured by the beautifully wrought image of a falling leaf. At the start of the novel Lily watches the descent of a leaf in autumn and discards the more obvious association with death for the image of a teenager leaving home: "She watched a leaf come down, a frivolous descent, as if it was embarking, not dying. It did not simply drop off the tree but detached itself fastidiously and then glided into freefall, a flimsy scrap of gold against the wide, cold sky, like a teenager leaving home, Ruth" (Boylan 25). At the end of the novel it becomes clear that this image might just as well represent Lily's own "embarking, not dying," thus subverting clear-cut notions of the life-course as a linear narrative of decline. While Boylan does not refrain from exploring the hardships of old age, including physical and mental deterioration as well as the challenges of coming to terms with grief, loss and the passage of time, she leaves the reader with an optimistic vision of the future and thus provides an important example of what Waxman calls a "groundbreaking literary genre that celebrates aging" (1990, 188).

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