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The Sea as a Setting and a Symbol
in Contemporary Irish and British Fiction:
Dermot Bolger's *Temptation* (2000), John Banville's *The Sea* (2005),
Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007)

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the function of the sea in contemporary British and Irish literature, focusing on the following three novels: Dermot Bolger's *Temptation* (2000), John Banville's *The Sea* (2005), and Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007). The analysis is divided into two main parts, where the sea is considered in its roles as a setting and as a symbol. The former section starts with a subsection on narrative and continues to investigate how the sea functions as a setting for childhood memories and for an escape from civilisation. It shows that the sea operates as a maker of character in all three novels, similarly to sea adventure fiction of the eighteenth century, whose protagonists also gained strength from it. However, it is the sea itself which stands in focus in contemporary literature, not the adventures set at sea. The section continues with an in-depth analysis of how the sea can mirror scenes of the story time, how it can be indifferent and work both as a positive and a negative force on the characters. Disillusionment, which is found in all the novels, undermines the sea as a solely positive force. It can be said to be both "cruel" and "a realm of escape and renewal" (Raban, *The Oxford Book of the Sea* 30) at the same time.

The next section deals with the sea functioning as a symbol, and investigates the sea imagery of the three novels, personifications of the sea and instances when the sea is given supernatural powers. Moreover, it is concerned with the sea becoming a symbol for the characters, and ends with a discussion on binary oppositions, as the characters repeatedly contrast themselves with the vast sea.

Twenty-first century sea fiction imitates earlier sea fiction while maintaining an original frame. The sea is given a major role in the development of the characters, triggers realisations about their lives and makes them leave their temporary retreat by the seaside as changed, strengthened people.

Key words: sea fiction, function, narrative, setting, symbol, personifications, binary oppositions, modernism, Romanticism, sea adventure.

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Introduction

*Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.*
(from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," 1867)

The sea has always been an attractive setting and symbol in literature; it can be found in many poems and novels throughout the centuries, especially from Great Britain and Ireland. There is no country which would suit a study of sea fiction better. After all, the British and Irish are surrounded by the sea and it never takes more than a few hours to get there. In his book *The Oxford Book of the Sea*, Jonathan Raban reminds us that "the most landlubberly speaker of colloquial English is prone to talk unconsciously in terms that come out of the sea" (7). This is an obvious indicator of the impact which the surrounding sea has on them. It is also a fact that without huge forests or open frontiers, "England's [and Ireland's] only untamed wilderness, where man might still feel small and alone in the vastness of Creation, was the sea" (Raban 15). Everybody who has been to the sea, breathed its salty air, walked along the beach and looked out towards the endlessness of the sea might agree that the sea can have a strong impact on us. This also applies to characters of various literary works set by the ocean, for example, the speaker of Matthew Arnold's famous poem "Dover Beach" which was written in 1867. Listening to the waves breaking, he starts to feel melancholy. This example shows that the sea in literature is not used as a random setting but fulfils a certain function.

I will discuss the function of the sea by focusing on the following three novels: Dermot Bolger's *Temptation* (2000), John Banville's *The Sea* (2005) and Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007). For a limited period of time, all characters from the books leave their busy urban lives behind and retreat to the seaside. It is significant to point out that they do not go to the ocean just for amusement but to perform rituals. In *Temptation* they go there for their annual Easter holiday, in *On Chesil Beach* for their wedding celebration, and in *The Sea* the protagonist comes to the sea to mourn over his wife's death and to come to terms with his life. The plots in all three novels are simple; little happens on the story level. Instead, the discourse time runs and the reader gets to know the characters by means of analepses into the past. The exposure to the endless sea makes the characters pause and reflect on their lives, both on the past and on how their lives will continue once they have left the sea. I chose three

novels whose characters are very different from each other and are in different periods of their lives: a married couple and their children, a widower, and a young, newly-wed couple. However, they are similar in that they all stand at turning points in their lives, and in choosing to come to the sea for these turning points, they come to the sea for a purpose and let it be an impact on them.

Before an in-depth analysis of the three contemporary novels and of how the sea functions in them, it is important to discuss a few examples of earlier sea fiction. This is because I agree with Harte and Parker who find that “[m]odern literature is by its very nature intertextual[,] an imitation or translation of earlier creative acts” (1). In the first part of this historical background section, I will discuss sea adventure fiction and Romantic poetry of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The sea is celebrated, personified and idealised in these literary works. I will then discuss a more muted and serious portrayal of the ocean, which can be found in Victorian poetry of the late nineteenth century and in modernist literature. In the discussion following the historical background section, I will consider which of these earlier trends of sea fiction have survived into the twenty-first century and how the sea operates in literature of today. I will discuss the function of the sea by dividing it into setting and symbol and will also discuss examples which could be argued to fit both categories.

I claim that the twenty-first century sea functions mainly as a setting and that the setting consists of many elements found in late nineteenth century poetry and modernist literature. This is the case because the sea in the three novels is portrayed in a muted tone and all the plots are minimal. The characters simply take in the vastness of the ocean and are invited to ponder over their lives while looking at it. They are aware of the sea being indifferent to their lives and problems. Thus, the role of the sea as a setting is connected to a form of disillusionment in the characters, which makes them accept difficult truths in life. In the next section I will then discuss instances when the sea functions as a symbol; I claim that while the role of the sea as a setting is connected to disillusionment, the role of the sea as a symbol is connected to Romanticism. When the ocean operates as a symbol, I find that it is often personified, idealised and connected to yearning; just like the sea of sea adventure fiction or Romantic poetry.

It might be difficult to always make a clear-cut distinction between the sea functioning as a setting and a symbol. For example, the binary oppositions which are to be found in the novels could be argued to operate as both a setting and a symbol at the same time. Characters are aware that the sea is their opposite; constant, strong and endless while

they experience continuous ups and downs, are weak and will eventually die. It is the sea functioning as a setting which makes the characters compare their lives with it in the first place. However, once they do make comparisons the sea serves as a symbol. I will discuss such examples where the division between setting and symbol is blurry.

Whether the sea functions as a setting or a symbol, the characters of several contemporary literary works yearn to come to the sea; it is the perfect place to pause and reflect on one's life. This dissertation sets out to examine how exactly the sea functions in literature of today. Passages from the novels will be indicated in parenthesis, when necessary, with the following abbreviations: *T* for Dermot Bolger's *Temptation*, *TS* for John Banville's *The Sea* and *OCB* for Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*.

A Brief Historical Background to Sea Fiction

The protagonists in sea adventure fiction battle life-threatening storms, reefs, deadly calms, scurvy, shipwreck, barren coasts, sharks, whales, mutinies, warring navies, natives, cannibals, and pirates—in short, they have *adventures* ... [A]dventure fiction subjects its protagonists to dangers to test and thereby affirm their identity. [This is why t]he figure of the mariner was imbued with a gritty glamour. (Cohen 3)

Focusing on the literary genre of the novel, Margaret Cohen's literary history *The Novel and the Sea* looks at sea fiction and discusses how it has changed through the centuries. She starts off by discussing sea adventure fiction. Protagonists of sea adventure fiction were eager to travel the world by ship and brave enough to face storms and other adventures set at sea. The protagonists' motives ranged from "survival, power, money, or knowledge, to the sheer thrill of the new" and to the desire to experience "the freedom of the seas" (Cohen 11). This might account for the popularity of sea adventure fiction with eighteenth and nineteenth century readers whose financial situation did not allow them to do any travelling themselves. Instead, they would take the adventures of ocean travel into their living rooms by acquiring a copy of, for example, Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). This novel forms the beginning of the tradition of sea adventure fiction; it was imitated and referred to in many other literary works which were written years, even decades, later, for example *The Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne (1858) and *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson (1883).

How does the sea function in these novels? Ian Watts argues in his book called *The Rise of the Novel* that "adventure stories demand the absence of conventional social ties" (65) and this is exactly what happens with the protagonist at sea: The sea serves as a setting which cuts the protagonist off all family and friends and leaves him to face life-threatening dangers all by himself. Such an isolated and dangerous setting must have a strong impact on the protagonist. I agree with Sam Bluefarb who argues in an article about the sea in fiction that this impact is so powerful that it shapes characters: "[T]he ship itself, once it puts to sea, is an isolated world in the cosmos of that sea [thus] the sea is both a reflector and a maker of character" (510). Even though the sea has a strong impact on the protagonist, it is not the sea which is in focus in sea adventure fiction. The focus is on the individual who fights for survival amongst storms and other life-threatening dangers on board of a ship. With *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe was the first novelist to give a realistic and authentic portrayal of sea adventures and to "reflect the deepest aspirations and dilemmas of individualism" (Watts 85):

I got up out of my cabin, and looked out; but such a dismal sight I never saw: the sea went mountains high, and broke upon us every three or four minutes; when I could look about, I could see nothing but distress round us... my heart was as it were dead within me, partly with fright, partly with horror of mind and the thoughts of what was yet before me. (*Robinson Crusoe* chapter 1, Start in Life)

As this short excerpt shows, the sea in *Robinson Crusoe* is uncontrolled, wild and magnificent (Raban 15). Despite the dangers which derive from the sea resulting in shipwreck, the sea functions as a positive force, which affirms Crusoe's identity and makes him who he wants to be: He survives the dangers of the sea, builds his personal empire on an island and becomes rich. It is true that "profit is Crusoe's only vocation, and the whole world is his territory" (Watts 67). For Ralph Rover and his two friends, the protagonists of *The Coral Island*, the purpose of travelling the ocean is not to make money – they travel it for the sake of adventure. We read in the prologue that the book is not intended for melancholy people, and indeed, it reads very light-heartedly. The sea is celebrated; the protagonists gain strength, self-confidence and pride from facing it.¹ However, just like in *Robinson Crusoe*, it is the protagonists and their adventures which are in focus, not the sea.

Moving from the sea as a celebrated setting in sea adventure fiction, the sea in Romantic poetry was personified and idealised and also functioned as a symbol. For the first time in the history of sea fiction it was the sea itself which was in focus, not the protagonist. Slowly but surely, "ships and sailors were progressively erased from imaginative depictions of the sea, [resulting] in the empty seas of the Romantic sublime" (Raban 11) and poets started to see the sea "as 'space itself' ... purified of human agency" (Cohen 117-18). This can be seen for example in John Keats's poem called "The Sea" (1820). We read in lines nine and ten "Oh ye! Who have your eye-balls vex'd and tired, Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea" (quoted in Raban 183). There was no longer any need for storms and adventures on

¹ Here are a few excerpts from *The Coral Island* which show that the sea functions as a positive force:

"Beyond this the sea rose and tossed violently from the effects of the storm ... My heart was filled with more delight than I can express" (*The Coral Island*, chapter IV).

"We felt very glad in our hearts as we walked along the sands side by side. For my part, I felt so deeply overjoyed, that I was surprised at my own sensations, and fell into a reverie upon the causes of happiness" (chapter IX).

"The sea was shining like a sheet of glass, yet heaving with the long deep swell that, all the world round, indicates the life of ocean; and the bright sea-weeds and the brilliant corals shone in the depths of that pellucid water, as we rowed over it, like rare and precious gems. Oh! it was a sight fitted to stir the soul of man to its profoundest depths" (XVI).

a ship. It was enough to be on the beach, to look out over the sea and take in its vastness. The sea for Keats, with its “eternal whisperings,” “mighty swell” and “gentle temper,” can have a strong impact. Even though it is the setting which inspires, the way the sea is described implies a personification. The sea functions as a positive force which can *do* something to the watching person.

Another example of a Romantic poet who personified the sea in his work is Lord Byron, a major agent of the Romantic movement, who “has taken most credit for inventing the nineteenth-century sea ... apostrophizing the ocean as his darling” (Raban 14). In Byron’s poetry the personification of the sea is even more prominent than in Keats’s. In “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto IV” (1818), for example, the sea functions as a symbol and is personified as a horse:

And I have loved thee, Ocean! And my joy
Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be
Borne like thy bubbles, onward: from a boy
I wanton’d with thy breakers—they to me
Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
Made them a terror—‘twas a pleasing fear,
For I was as it were a child of thee,
And trusted to thy billows far and near,
And laid my hand upon thy mane—as I do here.

(Byron quoted in Raban 183)

Swimming in the sea and riding its waves reminds the speaker of riding a horse – not just any horse, but one he dearly loves. How much and why Byron glorifies the sea becomes clear in the following lines of the same poem: “Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty’s form
Glasses itself in tempests; in all time ... Dark-heaving; boundless, endless, and sublime—“. The sea, for Byron, serves as a symbol of God. Tempests, which stir the wide ocean, become expressions of God and His ungraspable mysteries. According to Raban, “[t]he sea now commanded description, in increasingly obsessive detail” (11), and this can be seen in the excerpt by Byron. Byron serves as a good example for the personified sea in Romantic poetry. In addition to personifications, symbols were used to describe the sea (for example riding a horse symbolizes swimming in the sea) and the sea could function as a symbol of something else (for example a symbol of God). The use of symbols and personifications is what distinguishes Romantic sea poetry from sea adventure fiction; it makes the sea operate not merely as a setting but also as a symbol. What most of the Romantic poets of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century had in common with sea adventure fiction, though, was the following: The sea, despite tempests and terrors, still functioned as a positive force; a

force which did not necessarily shape the characters as was the case in sea adventure fiction, but rather made characters forget their problems and be merry.

When moving to late nineteenth and early twentieth literature, the sea started to be portrayed in a more muted and sober tone; the setting became a calm one. Poets focused no longer on action, nor did they idealise or celebrate the sea. The sea remained an inspiring setting for them, but it functioned no longer as an entirely positive force for Victorian protagonists. Instead, the calm portrayal of the sea made them pause and think about their lives. The sea could now trigger negative emotions in the protagonists, for example melancholy in the speaker of “Dover Beach.” Matthew Arnold’s poem, written in 1867, is an example of such a muted portrayal of the sea. After having described the ocean in three stanzas in a subdued manner, the speaker ends with the following lines:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

This is the disillusioned conclusion of a speaker who looks out to the sea. He sees the beauty of the sea, the beauty of “the world” which lies before him. However, instead of letting it be a positive force on him from which he could gain happiness and high spirits like his Romantic predecessors, he concludes that it “hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light.”

In modernist literature of the early twentieth century we find the same muted and sober portrayal of the sea. In T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), for example, we read: “On Margate Sands; I can connect; Nothing with nothing.” In order to recover from a mental breakdown, T.S. Eliot retreated to the seaside east of London at Margate in 1921. He spent long hours looking over the ocean and this influenced his writing. However, similarly to Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” the sea in the *The Waste Land* does not function as a positive force: “His sense of desolation went into the poem... [T]he seaside was, for Eliot, a site of modernist emptiness” (Feigel and Harris, *Modernism on Sea* 1). Thus, the sea operates mostly as a setting in *The Waste Land*. Also, if the sea operates as a symbol or is personified in modernist literature, it is often no longer a positive force for the protagonists as was the case in Romantic poetry. Raban argues that “the sea [in modernist literature] is, above all else,

cruel; its coldness and turbulence reflect the universal derangement of a world at war. Yet, side-by-side with the war novels, came a series of books in which the sea figures as a realm of escape and renewal” (30). Even though Raban argues that the sea in modernist fiction is *either* portrayed as “cruel” *or* as “a realm of escape and renewal,” I argue that both portrayals can be found in the same literary work. Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), a famous representative of modernist literature, is such an example. The following passage demonstrates the “opposing forces in Woolf’s seaside writing” (Feigel and Harris 9):

[T]he monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, ‘I am guarding you – I am your support,’ but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly ... had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea ... –this sound ... made her look up with an impulse of terror. (*TiL* 12)

The sea as a setting, namely the repetitive sound of the waves, makes Mrs Ramsey fall into a pleasant, soothing trance from which she can gain strength. Thus, to use Raban’s terminology, the sea can indeed be said to function as a realm of escape and renewal for a fraction of a second. Suddenly, however, there is a radical shift. “[U]nexpectedly,” the sea shows itself from its ‘cruellest’ side. The “monotonous fall of the waves” is now seen as a “ghostly roll of drums;” a simile which no longer connects the sea to a positive force. This happens without forewarning and without any change of setting or plot, which would have accounted for the shift. If the sea in modernist literature is portrayed as a realm of escape and renewal from time to time, it is not a constant portrayal but just a temporary glimpse of hope. Underneath the surface, there hovers the ‘cruel’ sea.² According to Bluefarb, the ‘cruel’ sea is a predominant feature of modernist literature: “There is an almost uncanny – even double-faced – alliance between the sea and the evil forces of this world” (502). No longer focusing on action and adventures at sea and no longer celebrating it, sea fiction of late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature portrayed the sea in a subdued manner, if not negatively. It

² Here are further examples of the ‘cruel’ sea in *To the Lighthouse*:

It was [Mr Ramsey’s] fate, his peculiarity, whether he wished it or not, to come out thus on a spit of *land which the sea is slowly eating away*, and there to stand, like a desolate sea-bird, alone. (32, *my emphasis*)

The whole sea for miles round ran red and gold. Some winey smell mixed with it and intoxicated [Lilly], for she felt again her own headlong desire to throw herself off the cliff and be drowned ... And the roar and the crackle repelled her with fear and disgust, as if while she saw its splendour and power she saw too how it fed on the treasure of the house, greedily, disgustingly, and she loathed it. (131)

functioned mainly as a calm setting which made characters pause, think about their lives and question themselves.

In this section, I have discussed major trends in sea fiction, focusing on sea adventure fiction, Romantic and Victorian poetry and modernist literature set by the sea. Every major literary trend overlaps with other trends and counterexamples may be found for any of my examples. Still, these major trends in the history of sea fiction exist and this background will be helpful when discussing contemporary sea fiction. When I ask myself what is characteristic of today's sea fiction, it is important to be able to refer back and discuss the extent to which earlier trends have survived. This is a question which is also of importance to John Banville, author of one of the three novels which I will discuss. He says the following in an interview in 1981:

Modernism has run its course. So also, for that matter, has postmodernism. I believe, at least I hope, that we are on the threshold of a new *ism*, a synthesis. What will it be? I do not know. But I hope it will be an art which is honest enough to despair and yet go on; rigorous and controlled, cool and yet passionate, without delusions, aware of its own possibilities and its own limits; an art which knows that truth is arbitrary, that reality is multifarious, that language is not a clear lens.

(quoted in McMinn 89)

I will examine in how far twenty-first century sea fiction meets these criteria and is realistic, disillusioned and yet passionate.

The Sea as a Setting

Narrative

In this section I intend to discuss the form and narratives of the three novels in question, as it is interesting to observe how the narrators relate to the sea as a setting in different ways. Max, the homodiegetic narrator of *The Sea*, takes the reader straight to the sea. He starts his narration *in medias res* describing the sea and its waves on “the day of the strange tide” (3). It does not become clear until the end of the novel that these first two pages are an internal analepsis³ of the day when his childhood friends Chloe and Myles disappeared while swimming in the sea. This incident happened fifty years prior to the story time. Max abandons this line of thought abruptly, though, and starts another. When reading words like “pebble-dashed windowless white end-wall” (4) and “old seafarer,” the reader gradually guesses that the present of the narrative must also be set by the sea but it is not confirmed until page ten when he states, “I walked down Station Road in the sunlit emptiness of afternoon. The beach at the foot of the hill was a fawn shimmer under indigo.” The entire narrative consists of associative thoughts with several digressions and jumps in time. For example, it moves from a bird’s crushed eggs to his wife Anna’s vomit fifty years later simply because Max is reminded of it (159-60). Another example is that Sunday lunch with Bun, Miss V and the Colonel in the present of the story time reminds Max of Sunday lunch with his former neighbours, the Graces, half a century earlier (207). Often he applies the stream-of-consciousness technique (31, 56, 218). In this the text resembles Virginia Woolf’s modernist novel *To the Lighthouse* which is also set by the sea.⁴ After all, which narrative technique could portray a setting by the sea better than the stream-of-consciousness technique? A continuous flow of words captures the continuous flow of water, which the characters are exposed to when they are by the sea. It is the flow of water which reinforces sensual perceptions and jumbled-up associations in the characters, all of which take the form of flowing words. Thus, the setting in *The Sea*, the endless stream of water, seems to be reflected in the form of the novel as Max’s endless stream of thoughts.

³ An internal analepsis points to an episode in the past within the narrative (Genette 51-52).

⁴ Here is a stream-of-consciousness example from *To the Lighthouse*: “And then, letting her eyes slide imperceptibly above the pool and rest on that wavering line of sea and sky, on the tree trunks which the smoke of steamers made waver on the horizon, she became with all that dower sweeping savagely in and inevitably withdrawing, hypnotised, and the two senses of that vastness and this tininess (the pool had diminished again) flowering within it made her feel that she was bound hand and foot and un- able to move by the intensity of feelings which reduced her own body, her own life, and the lives of all the people in the world, for ever, to nothingness” (55).

Compared to the two heterodiegetic narrators in *Temptation* and *On Chesil Beach*, Max in *The Sea* is the most unreliable narrator, often because he does not remember:

Later that day, the day the Graces came, or the following one, or the one following that, I was the black car again (9). What age were we, ten, eleven? Say eleven, it will do (30). But wait, this is wrong. This cannot have been the day of the kiss ... Really, Madam Memory, I take back all my praise (162-3).

Often he is also unreliable because he does not care. This can be seen in the following two passages: “I might go mad here. *Deedle deedle*” (9) and “[i]t was Myles, I may as well give him his name” (27). Max also writes when he is drunk which makes the reader question his reliability further, especially when he starts to ramble incoherently: “All gone. All lost. It is no matter. Tired, tired and drunk. No matter” (184). “Where is my bottle? I need my big baby’s bottle. My soother” (248). The reader does not learn of Max’s own name until page thirteen and it is often necessary to infer the connection between characters. However, the mere fact that Max writes a diary for himself and not for anybody else points to an underlying truth or at least a wish for truth in all of his writing. After all, there is no need to make something sound better than what it is when you are writing to yourself. Even though we can still not be sure how reliable a homodiegetic narration really is, we might assume that Max at least tries to be truthful to himself.

In his article “Versions of Banville: Versions of Modernism,” Joseph McMinn calls this kind of writing in Banville’s fiction “an intense, confessional monologue [marked] by authorial absence” (84). This is true for Max as he does not fool himself about his situation. Moreover, there is no restraint and no holding back of emotions. Addressing his dead wife Anna, he writes: “You cunt, you fucking cunt, how could you go and leave me like this, floundering in my own foulness, with no one to save me from myself. *How could you*” (*TS* 196). He writes for himself as therapy and he chooses to go to the sea for a therapy which lasts several weeks. For Max the sea is “the only possible place, the only possible refuge” (157). While his writing consists of analepses into the past of fifty years ago which are only partly set by the ocean, he always comes back to the present in his writing and lets the ocean be an influence on him and his thoughts (65, 71, 93, 132, 162). As he is there by himself, the sea is the only ‘person’ Max is able to talk to and be inspired by. There is no distance to Max’s writing, firstly, because he is both narrator and protagonist, and, secondly, because he writes to himself rather than to somebody else. Thus, the homodiegetic narration of *The Sea*, both unreliable and truthful at the same time, is the most immediate means to capture how and to what extent the sea influences Max.

The sea in the heterodiegetic narrations in the two other novels is just as powerful a force which triggers thoughts in the characters; however, it is a narrator outside of the story world who informs the reader about the effect which the sea has on characters. This is why there is bound to be a distance between narrator and characters. Such a narrative technique accounts for a slight increase of descriptions of both the sea as a setting and of the characters, thus, focusing on discourse while the plots are minimal. *On Chesil Beach*, a one-hundred-sixty-six-page long novel, consists of a story time of only a few hours. The novel starts with the formal dinner of the young couple's wedding night and ends the next morning. In *Temptation* the story time is only slightly longer. It consists of five days, namely from Sunday till Friday morning of the family's Easter holiday. This is completely different in *The Sea*, which consists of a much longer story time (several weeks) and which is not a coherent narrative but consists mainly of "discontinuous events" (Peach, "Return to Silence and beyond" 217). The result is the same for all three novels, however: The story time is often stretched or comes to a standstill when the sea is described, which keeps the plots of all three novels simple and action-less. In *On Chesil Beach*, the reader is introduced to "the Dorset coast" as early as the first page and a description of the setting follows on page five:

Desperate for the waiters to leave, he and Florence turned in their chairs to consider the view of a broad mossy lawn, and beyond, a tangle of flowering shrubs and trees clinging to a steep bank that descended to a lane that led to the beach ... The garden vegetation rose up, sensuous and tropical in its profusion, an effect heightened by the grey, soft light and a delicate mist drifting in from the sea, whose steady motion of advance and withdrawal made sounds of gentle thunder, then sudden hissing against the pebbles.

This descriptive passage makes for a stretch of the story time while the discourse time continues. While it describes a scene set by the sea without a plot interfering and distracting from the setting, it simultaneously invites the reader to pause and to engage with the narrative. This happens especially when reading the last part of the passage from *On Chesil Beach*, which seems to almost directly refer back to Arnold's "Dover Beach." The speaker of the poem also mentions "the grating roar Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, At their return, up the high strand" (lines 9-11). He associates this setting with melancholy which the third stanza shows:

The Sea of Faith ...
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.

The further one reads in *On Chesil Beach*, the more one realises that the two literary works are similar, not only when it comes to their titles and their setting. Just like in the poem, the setting in *On Chesil Beach* is also connected to melancholy, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.⁵

Possibilities for identification are also created in *On Chesil Beach* by general facts about life or the human body which the omniscient narrator states in the present tense: “There is a certain kind of confident traveller who likes to open the carriage door just before the train has stopped” (70), “[i]t is shaming sometimes, how the body will not, or cannot, lie about emotions” (86), “clarity ... comes with a sudden absence of desire” (133). It is not necessary that the reader agrees with the narrator. He or she might question the narrator’s reliability after reading these general truths. However, what matters is that both the descriptive and the general truth passages in one way or the other make the reader engage with the narrative. When it comes to the characters, a variable, internal focalisation⁶ between the characters of Edward and Florence has the same effect. The reader observes the same scene through the eyes of one character in one paragraph and through the eyes of the other in the next paragraph. According to Norman Friedman in his article on double vision in *To the Lighthouse*, “[p]ersonality, then, can be known only in terms of a multiple perspective” (65). This is also the case in *On Chesil Beach* where “each character is presented from at least two points of view” (Friedman 65); namely from Edward’s and from Florence’s. Sometimes the character is presented from the narrator’s point of view, for example when he states, “[Florence] never could quite get the full measure of her own ignorance, because in some matters she thought she was rather wise” (*OCB* 142). Presenting characters from various points of view makes a heterodiegetic narration more objective and more reliable.

Apart from many descriptive passages of the sea as a setting, we can tell that the sea has an influence on the characters in *On Chesil Beach*. For example, Edward associates the sea breeze with freedom and is “troubled by the call of the beach...Trudging along the beach would have been better than sitting here” (19). Florence feels similarly. After the incident in the hotel room she is “ashamed... That was why she had run so far along the beach, through the heavy shingle in her going-away shoes, to flee the room and all that had happened in it, and to escape herself” (140). The sea in *On Chesil Beach* is always present both prior to the scene which is set by the beach and after it. When Edward and Florence are still at the hotel,

⁵ The fact that Ian McEwan knows “Dover Beach” is also revealed in his novel *Saturday*, in which the poem is referred to more explicitly; Perowne’s daughter Daisy recites it.

⁶ Compare Genette, “Focalizations,” p. 189.

“the distant waves,” “the smell of the sea” (99) and “the sea breeze” (105) constantly remind them of the sea. Often, this reminder triggers thoughts in them. This is also the case once they have left the setting of the beach. After the seven-page long compression about Edward’s life until his 60s at the end of the novel, the narrator comes back to that day on Chesil Beach and ends the novel thus:

[S]he would have turned back. Instead, he stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer’s dusk, watching her hurry along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light. (166)

Even though there is more distance to the writing in a heterodiegetic narration, the narrator succeeds in letting us engage with the characters and in letting the sea be an inspiring force on them.

The heterodiegetic narration in *Temptation* occupies a middle position between the other two novels. It comes close to a homodiegetic narration by means of a fixed internal focalisation.⁷ This focalisation captures Alison’s impressions and describes how the sea as a setting influences her. The narrator is closer to her than the narrator in *On Chesil Beach* is to Edward and Florence because he limits himself to her knowledge. This becomes clear when a random woman at Fitzgerald’s Hotel is referred to as “Chris’s wife” (*T* 57) and, four pages later, both Alison and the reader have to realise that this was a wrong assumption, because Chris’s wife had died in a car accident. After her husband Peadar has informed Alison about the accident, we read: “‘But...’ Alison stopped. She had never actually seen Chris with the fair-haired woman. She had just presumed and linked them in her mind” (62). Also, we only get access to other characters’ thoughts through Alison: “She sensed his sudden desire to be away, anonymous again” (96). So how does this heterodiegetic narrator relate to the sea? Just like in *On Chesil Beach* there are many scenes within the five-day long story time which are not set by the sea, for example the drive to the hotel, the scenes at the pool, the steam room, the dining room or their hotel room. Also, there are many analepses into the past outside of the story time. For example, Alison thinks about how she met her husband Peadar, and how she would almost have chosen Chris if he had not been so shy twenty years ago.

Despite or because of this preoccupation with the past, both Alison and Chris feel the constant need to get out and be by the sea. Chris, for example, wanders in the garden after dark in order to ponder by the sea and come to terms with his recent loss of both his wife and his two children; Alison can hear his footsteps from the hotel room (*T* 102). Just like Florence

⁷ Compare Genette, “Focalizations,” p. 189.

in *On Chesil Beach*, Alison also runs for the beach when everything gets too much for her (T 70). How soothing an effect the closeness to the sea can have becomes clear later in the novel: “Alison picked Sheila up, despite her protests and carried her outside. She sat on a bench, rocking her, humming snatches of tunes, needing to feel the warmth of her daughter’s body and be out ... in the sea air ... Alison needed to escape from the hotel” (T 157). Both Chris and Alison feel the need to escape and to be outside. They head for the beach in order to be by themselves and to be able to think. It is the free-indirect discourse technique⁸ which allows the reader to discover this through Alison’s thoughts. In *Temptation*, even though still a heterodiegetic narration, there is less distance to the character of Alison and the effect which the sea has on her than in *On Chesil Beach*.

Retreat from Life

“Memory dislikes motion, preferring to hold things still.”
(Max in *TS* 221)

The sea serves as a setting to pause and think for all the characters of the three novels; for a short period of time, it becomes their retreat from every-day life in the city. Patrick Parrinder writes in his book *Nation & Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day* that the city in literature is associated with the excitement of young adulthood, whereas the countryside is associated with childhood (397). Even though I find the sea an even more powerful setting than the countryside in general, it is true especially for Max that childhood memories come back to him when he retreats from civilisation. In fact, as his childhood memories are much more prominent than the present, one could argue that Max “write[s] about the present through the aspect of the past” (Parrinder 411). I should point out that it is not the immediate but the faraway past which is soothing for him, namely any memory prior to his wife’s sickness and death. When Anna was dying, “[Max and her] sought escape from an intolerable present in the only tense possible, the past, that is, the faraway past” (*TS* 99). After her death the present is still intolerable for him and so is the immediate past. Thus, he comes to the sea in order to live amidst the memories of this faraway past. He is aware of this and states it several times: “I who have come back to live amidst the rubble of the past” (4); “The past beats inside me like a second heart” (13); “[L]ive in the past, do I” (69). The following passage shows that it is the setting of the sea which makes this living in the past

⁸ With this technique “the character’s consciousness is recreated apparently without any interfering agency: (i.e. narrator) who tries to put it into well-turned English. The character’s thoughts are presented directly, imitating as much as possible the character’s mind style.” Web. 10. March 2014.

possible for Max: “[T]here it all was before me, the hill road, and the beach at the bottom, and the sea. I did not stop at the house but only slowed as we went by. There are moments when the past has a [strong] force” (47). It is the sea as a setting which triggers these childhood memories in Max. After all, it was by the sea that every summer of his childhood took place. Moreover, it was the setting for his childhood trauma, namely his first love Chloe and her twin brother vanishing in it. How deep a shock this trauma left behind becomes clear when he states repeatedly that he would never swim again after that day (3, 4). It makes the ocean a meaningful setting for Max, and it is no longer surprising that he should choose to go there when his wife dies. He is at a turning point in his life, trying to recover from both recent and distant losses, and the sea serves as a good setting to do so:

Down here, by the sea, there is a special quality to the silence at night. I do not know if this is my doing... or if it is a local effect, due to the salt in the air, perhaps, or the seaside climate in general. (71)

[T]he beach in the darkness, the sand cool on top but keeping still the day’s warmth underneath, and the long lines of white waves breaking on the bias, lit from inside themselves somehow, and over everything the night, silence, secret and intent. (162)

These two passages are a good example of “the silent, or speechless, essence of great literary art” which Banville has often stressed in interviews according to McMinn (79). I find Banville comes close to his demand on literature in his own work through numerous loving descriptions of the sea (*TS* 3, 59, 62, 93, 184, 244) and the lack of action. “[I]maginative landscape” (McMinn 81) descriptions of the sea help the reader understand why Max chooses to come to this meaningful setting for his turning point in life.

For Alison in *Temptation*, the sea at Wexford and by Fitzgerald’s Hotel is also an important setting. Firstly, it is connected to her childhood, as she used to go there with her parents and continues this tradition with her husband Peadar. Secondly, the sea was also the setting for her first kiss when she was twelve (63-4, 70) and she is reminded of lunch with Chris on the beach at Loughshinny when she was eighteen (170-1). For Alison, coming to the sea for their annual holiday means a break from every-day life. She finds that “Fitzgerald’s Hotel [is] a continuum existing outside time, an uninterrupted pattern forever and ever” (97). Being at the hotel and close to the sea is special to Alison. The sea for her becomes a setting for facing reality and seeing where she stands in life. It gives her room and time to think which she does not usually have in her busy life with three children. This is already apparent during the drive to Wexford: “A foreboding crept over her in the car, a melancholic hangover... Soon the first glimpse of the sea” (28-9). Whereas she can pretend to be happy at home and bury her anxieties and doubts in her busy every-day life, coming to the sea means

to pause and to listen to her inner voice. It means acknowledging that a trip to the seaside becomes a “return of what has been secret or suppressed” (Peach 198). Whereas the sea has always been a special setting for Alison, it is this year’s holiday by the sea which forms a turning point in Alison’s life. She says, “[b]ut this year felt different. Suddenly she didn’t care if the house burnt down when they were away” (*T* 15). She says this even before she meets Chris at the hotel. It is coming to the sea which triggers this new way of thinking in Alison. However, it is obvious that meeting her old love Chris there helps her acknowledge this turning point in her life: “Meeting him again was like being forced to sit in judgement on herself. The reality of now versus the image he had carried about for twenty years” (170). Her turning point will be discussed in more detail in the “The Sea as a Symbol” section.

Coming to the sea for Edward and Florence is also connected to a turning point in their lives. This turning point, free from worries, is one of happily spending the rest of their lives together. At least, this is what they set out to do, the reason why they came to the sea and what the reader might expect from a wedding night.⁹ Contrary to these expectations, however, the sea does not function as a setting of enjoyment and celebration in *On Chesil Beach*. Just like in Arnold’s late-Victorian poem “Dover Beach,” the portrayal of the sea in Ian McEwan’s novel is muted, somehow mirroring Edward’s and Florence’s increasingly difficult situation. The sea serves as a setting to pause and think because there is nothing to celebrate. This muted portrayal of the sea is demonstrated in the following passage:

A shift or a strengthening of the wind brought them the sound of waves breaking, like a distant shattering of glasses. The mist was lifting to reveal in part the contours of the low hills, curving away above the shoreline to the east. They could see a luminous grey smoothness that may have been the silky surface of the sea itself, or the lagoon, or the sky – it was difficult to tell. (17-8)

Remembering the melancholy tone in “Dover Beach,” this passage is a good example of the same tone in *On Chesil Beach*. Here, it seems to reflect the increasingly sad feelings in Edward and Florence.

The calm and endlessness of the sea in *On Chesil Beach* also gives room to thoughts in the characters which are not related to the present of the story time. This applies also to scenes which are not set by the sea. Still at the hotel, Florence “listened to the distant waves ... Here came the past anyway, the indistinct past” (99). Bluefarb argues that the sea serves as a setting to escape the past (503). However, this passage from *On Chesil Beach* and the earlier discussion about Max’s childhood memories by the sea suggest the exact opposite. As

⁹ The fact that the sea is a welcoming setting for celebrating a recent marriage is also mentioned in *The Sea* when Max writes about “the odd pair of honeymooners” (6) coming to the seaside.

Florence is decisively unwilling to move her physical relationship with Edward further, she is thankful for any distraction. The sea for both her and Banville's Max is a welcoming setting; it is powerful enough to prevent themselves from focusing on the present. Instead, they focus on the past.¹⁰ McMinn finds that Banville's "characters are repeatedly bewildered... and deeply distressed" (85), which also applies to McEwan's character Florence. She is increasingly distressed by Edward's expectations and the unfolding of events at the hotel room. She is in need of the soothing sea when everything else seems hostile and against her.¹¹ According to Bluefarb, "the sea... is a siren which draws the lost, the outraged, the adventuresome to her call" (503). Here, I agree with Bluefarb as both Florence and Max are lost and outraged and find the sea the only possible place for refuge (*TS* 157). When Florence finally escapes to the sea, "[s]he was not in love, nor out of love – she felt nothing. She just wanted to be here alone in the dusk against the bulk of her giant tree... It irritated her, the way he pursued her so quickly along the beach, when he should have given her time to herself" (*OCB* 143-46). At last, Florence can make use of the ocean as distraction for a short period of time until Edward finds her. Being left alone on the beach is the only possible way of coping for her at that moment.

The sea as setting means also a lot to Edward. However, he does certainly not share Florence's urge to be alone by the sea, nor does he understand her urge to do so on their wedding night. Throughout the formal meal, he yearns to go to the beach *with* Florence. He wants to escape the awkwardness and the restraint of the scene and simply celebrate: "[I]f he had known how to propose it, or justify it, he might have suggested going out straight away" (19). Gradually, in the course of the evening and with their final conversation on the beach, Edward comes to realise that the sea is not going to be a setting for celebration. It is interesting that once he realises this, he *does* want to be alone by the sea, just like Florence earlier. After their conversation, he chooses to stay "out on the beach another hour, savouring the full deliciousness of the injury and wrong and insult she had inflicted on him" (157).

Even though the reasons for coming to the sea are very different for all the characters in the three novels, they all stand at turning points in their lives. The sea for Edward and Florence becomes a setting for digesting the fact that they will be going their separate ways from now on. It is still a turning point but not the happy one of a newly-wed couple which

¹⁰ Even though Florence is glad of any distraction and finds the sea a welcoming setting, unlike Max, the past is not soothing for her. Still, the force of the past is so strong that she cannot ignore it. I will discuss this scene in more detail in the section "The Sea as a Symbol."

¹¹ "[Florence] wanted to run from the room, across the gardens and down the lane, onto the beach to sit alone. Even one minute alone would have helped. But her sense of duty was painfully strong" (32).

both the characters in the novel and the reader anticipated. The sea then becomes a setting where “each man [or woman] sees the challenge in terms of his [/her] own decisions in a crises. In this lies the force of the sea” (Bluefarb 510). It is an effective setting to face reality, even for Florence. By choosing to escape the hotel room and by wanting to just sit by the sea alone, she implicitly acknowledges the turning point in her life. She acknowledges her ‘no’ to the relationship with Edward, if he will not accept her proposal of having an open marriage.

It is true for all three novels that the sea as a setting becomes more prominent towards the end of the narrative. As we have seen in *On Chesil Beach*, there is just one scene set by the sea, namely in part five, which forms the last part of the novel. Florence runs to the beach on pages 106-7. On page 135 Edwards goes out to find her and only then do they talk by the sea. It is a scene which makes for the climax of the novel (139-159) because it decides about their entire future, whether there can be a reunion or whether they will separate. Even though Max in *The Sea* takes the reader straight to the seaside in his childhood memories and returns to it often throughout the novel, it is not until the end that the sea becomes a prominent setting also in the story time. While Max keeps his distance from the ocean throughout the novel, merely listening to the waves breaking or looking at it from the distance, the climax of the novel happens by the water towards the end. It is the penultimate scene of the novel where the drunken Max wades into the sea and would have been killed if he had not been found. It is this incident which takes Max back into the present and makes him want to return to civilisation. In *Temptation* the sea is mentioned only occasionally in the beginning with characters sometimes looking at it from the distance (27, 29, 68, 108). The first scene which is actually set by the sea is as far into the novel as page seventy, when Alison runs for the beach in order to have a break from her family. It is in the last two parts of the novel, parts “Wednesday” and “Thursday,” that the sea as a setting becomes more prominent because Alison senses that Chris plans to drown himself in the sea. The climax happens when Alison’s foreboding is confirmed on the last night of her holiday and she swims out to the sea in order to rescue Chris. All these climaxes of the three novels show how powerful a setting the sea is to the characters.

There are many objective correlatives in the three novels: The setting by the sea and how it is described repeatedly reflects a character’s emotion or the mood of a scene. In *Temptation*, for example, it is raining when Alison feels dejected. Standing on the porch overlooking the car park, she finds “the noise of the rain ... soothing” (114), because she can relate to the rain as something which mirrors her own sadness. When Chris tells Alison about

the accident which killed both his wife and his two little girls, the sun goes in behind clouds and a breeze starts to blow. Here, the weather mirrors the darkening mood in Alison who gets upset by Chris's narrative: "[B]ut it wasn't the wind that made her cold. She suddenly wished he hadn't drunk the wine, that he had left at dawn without seeing her" (152). Sometimes the setting both imitates the characters' feelings and emphasizes the mood of a scene. This is the case when Alison's daughter Sheila is seriously sick and has to be driven to the hospital by Chris: "In the rain, his wipers could hardly keep the windscreen clear ... She stared across impatiently" (119). Here, the heavy rain does not only mirror her own anxiety but also adds to the dramatic mood of the scene. This is also the case with the scenes set by the sea towards the end of the novel. When the troubled Alison runs to the beach in order to look for Chris, the entire scene mirrors her dark foreboding that he plans to drown himself. The setting is described as dark and "[t]he blackness frightened her" (180), she is "bitterly cold, the wind making a mess of her hair," there are "waves flashing below her" and "flashes from four distant lighthouses lit the dark sea, each with its coded signals" (181). The sea as a setting is lit up like a stage, where something dramatic is about to happen. Even at this point, the signs in the text suggest that whatever is about to happen is going to be bad. However, the signs become even clearer the second night by the sea; the night when Alison *does* find Chris at last and can rescue him from drowning himself:

It was madness to leave [her children] alone ... The gardens looked even darker than last night. A wind was up, tossing trees about ... shaky light, against a backdrop of vast shadows from waving branches. Her foot slipped into the water ... She fell with a muffled thud ... Complete darkness enveloped her ... The beach seemed deserted ... a shape in the water caught her eye ... Chris Conway staggered and fell, being almost swept back out by the waves ... she realised he was cursing his own cowardice. His clothes and hair were drenched. He struggled to his feet and faced the waves again. Was it really this hard to die, even when you wanted to, when you had nothing left to live for? (212-13)

It is interesting how the climax of the novel, Chris trying to drown himself in the ocean, is reflected in the increasingly dark portrayal of the setting. It shows that the sea and the countryside surrounding it do not only mirror characters' emotions and the mood of scenes, they also function as a powerful setting. The setting is powerful because characters are drawn to the sea; they feel connected to it and understood by it. Objective correlatives emphasize this connection between the characters' emotions and the sea as a powerful setting.

In the narrative section I touched upon the fact that the stream-of-consciousness technique in *The Sea*, with its continuous flow of words, mirrors the continuous flow of water in the ocean. While the form of the novel thus mirrors the sea, the sea itself and the weather

by the sea also mirror the mood of characters and scenes. On the day of the picnic, for example, the setting by the sea mirrors Rose's sulky mood: We read that "the *crooked* pine *soughed* above [them]" and that there is the smell of "*crushed* ferns, and the *salt tang* of the sea" (114, *my emphasis*). The same applies to another day on the beach when Chloe is "bored and in malevolent mood." The "blustery grey afternoon" (170) goes hand in hand with her dark mood, both mirroring and emphasizing it. Bluefarb argues that "[i]n the fiction and the drama of the sea, the storms and the calms both induce and reflect the storms and the calms within the souls and the bodies of the characters themselves ... in this lies the mirror of the sea as a reflector of character" (501-10). This is demonstrated in the following passage where it is the sea itself which reflects Max's mood. When he, looking out towards the sea, finds himself thinking about his daughter's ex-boyfriend who made her abandon her studies and who then left her, Max gets increasingly upset. He states: "I wanted to go after him and kill him." This change in mood is reflected in the sea: "The sea that before had been silent had now set up a vague tumult, perhaps the tide was on the turn" (*TS* 63). "At last, I thought, at last the elements have achieved a pitch of magnificence to match my inner turmoil!" (184). These words are Max's thoughts when a storm blows over the beach, with "the sky stamping up and down in a fury, breaking its bones" (184). The storm reflects Max's own feelings, the constant ups and downs of violent emotions. It reflects the fact that Max is torn between wanting to die on the one hand or giving life and happiness one more chance on the other. For the first time in a long time, Max feels connected to the setting around him because it reflects his own feelings.

There are also objective correlatives to be found in *On Chesil Beach*. I have already briefly mentioned how the melancholy tone with which the sea is described in the novel reflects the sad feelings in Edward and Florence. This is just one example of how McEwan pays careful attention to detail and how the sea as a setting reflects the different scenes in the novel. Another example of this is the scene of Edward trying to unzip Florence's dress in the hotel room. When he does not succeed after several attempts, he gives up and "[t]hey went and sat together on the bed" (83). Then a description of the sea follows:

Here in the bedroom the windows were open wide towards the same view of hotel lawn, woodland and sea. A sudden shift in wind or tide, or perhaps it was the wake of a passing ship, brought the sound of several waves breaking in succession, hard smacks against the shore. Then, just as suddenly, the waves were as before, tinkling and raking softly across the shingle. (83)

These few “hard smacks” of waves mirror Edward’s desperate attempts to unzip the dress. When the sea then calms down again, unchanged, it mirrors the young couple sitting on the bed, still dressed and unchanged, just like they were before. When Florence escapes from the hotel room at last, the darkening portrayal of the setting mirrors Edward’s increasingly negative feelings: Left behind in the hotel room, “he stared out of the window at the wind-shrunk trees, darkened now to a continuous grey-green mass. High up was a smoky half-moon, casting virtually no light” (131). When later in the novel, Florence sits on the beach, she can see Edward approaching from the distance. She can make out his outline in the darkening setting. Edward as the only person standing out by the sea is mirrored by “a silver streak of water, a current that plumed far out to sea behind him” (142), while the rest of the sea is smooth. So far Edward and Florence have been over-anxious and careful not to hurt each other’s feelings with a rash comment or sudden behaviour (4, 5). Both have tried hard to please the other (11, 23, 33, 103). However, when they start talking by the open sea, they become more and more outspoken. In fact, they start to argue and make their situation increasingly worse by misunderstandings which they decide to leave unresolved: Edward says, “‘Wheedling? I don’t understand. I hope you’re not talking about money.’ She was not. ... So money would have to do as the subject – in fact, it did perfectly well, because now he was roused” (145-7). While they are arguing thus, the sea comes into the picture. We read that “she saw his outline clearly against the dying glow on the water behind him” (47). The “dying glow” seems to mirror the dying of the affection which Edward and Florence hold for each other. Additionally, it can be said to mirror the dying hope or likelihood that they will turn the conversation around and be able to rescue their marriage.

Interestingly, the last stanza of Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” reveals a similar conflict between the speaker and his love. It points to the fact that the sea shore is no place for pretence. It is a place where doubts are uttered and truths revealed, all of which might be successfully covered up in the characters’ busy urban lives but comes to light by the sea. The speaker states: “And we are here as on a darkling plain; Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night.” Similarly to *On Chesil Beach*, the speaker of “Dover Beach” reveals an increasing uncertainty as to whether he and his love are able to rescue their relationship. This uncertainty is mirrored in the muted portrayal of the setting: “The Sea of Faith” becomes the sea of “melancholy” for the speaker. Judith Seaboyer finds “that McEwan ... details both public and private spheres and outer and inner worlds but ... he also scrutinises these spaces, seeking out unmapped parallels and tensions” (23-4). As the examples from *On Chesil Beach* show, the public sphere and outer world, namely the sea

as a setting, mirror the scenes of the story time. In turn, these scenes are connected to the private sphere mirroring the inner world, respectively the feelings, of Edward and Florence.

These examples have shown that the sea as a setting is powerful and the following section will discuss what exactly it *does* to the characters. In *The Sea* Max states:

[I]t is fairly blowing a tempest out there, which must be the cause of this giddiness I am feeling. For I have always been strongly susceptible to the weather and its effects ... when the autumn gales groaned in the chimneys and the waves were coming over the sea wall in washes of boiling white spume. (93)

For Max, giddiness is a momentary effect of breathing the sea air. However, the sea as a setting is so powerful that it affects him on a much deeper level than causing momentary feelings. Being by the sea, the characters of all three novels come to a realisation about their lives. This realisation is necessary for them in order to come to terms with themselves and to be able to resume their life in civilisation as changed persons. Max in *The Sea* reveals to the reader that, when his wife got ill, he “developed, by a mysterious process of transference, a crawling repugnance of [his] own flesh[,] a sense of self-disgust” (70). In the course of her sickness, he starts to disapprove of himself. He starts to hate himself because there is nothing he can do to make things better: “She did not care what I thought. By now she had gone beyond me and my opinions” (183). All he can do is watch her die. When he comes to the sea after her death, pondering his life in isolation, he has the following realisation:

To be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have ever truly wanted ... This is a surprising, not to say shocking, realisation. Before, I saw myself as something of a buccaneer, facing all-comers with a cutlass in my teeth, but now I am compelled to acknowledge that this was a delusion. (60)

Realising and accepting that he is a sensitive person at heart, not a cold buccaneer, is necessary for Max. Only once he accepts this fact about his person, can he be gentle with himself. Slowly but surely, he comes to understand that, when you have just lost your wife, it is acceptable to be sad, and he states: “What a little vessel of sadness we are, sailing in this muffled silence through the autumn dark” (72). Not only does Max come to a realisation by the sea, he also makes use of sea imagery in order to express this realisation. It shows how inspiring a setting the sea is. Max begins to understand that there is no need to gloss over this sadness by pretending to be tough. This is why he agrees to give up alcohol at the end of the narrative; and why he agrees to live with his daughter Claire who will take care of him. Even though he tells his landlady that he is forced to accept these changes, deep within, he knows it is right. This is reflected in Miss Vavasour’s reply: ““Oh Max ... I do not think you are a man

to be forced into anything” (260). Max acknowledges his sadness and sensitiveness and incapability to live on his own. It is coming to the sea which makes Max come to terms with who he is and the new situation of being a widower.

Even though Florence in *On Chesil Beach* had been seeing Edward for one year, had agreed to marry him months ago, and had been kissed by him before – it is the kiss of their wedding night by the sea which brings forth a realisation in her. When they kiss,

[h]er hands for form’s sake resting on Edward’s hips, Florence realised she had stumbled across an empty truth, self-evident enough in retrospect, as primal and ancient as *danegeld* or *droit de seigneur*, and almost too elemental to define: in deciding to be married, she had agreed to exactly this. She had agreed it was right to do this, and have this done to her ... the supposed maturity, the confetti and cake – was a polite distraction. And if she didn’t like it, she alone was responsible, for all her choices over the past year were always narrowing to this. (30)

It is in the hotel room by the sea, with the distant waves beating against the sea shore, that Florence realises the truth that being married entails a physical relationship to her husband and that this is something she cannot do. Acknowledging this truth is necessary for Florence in order to break free from tradition. Only now can she act freely, even though it means to risk losing the man she loves. It is only after this realisation that she stops acting according to other people’s expectations: When they are on the beach, she manages to speak up and suggest an open marriage, one in which he is allowed to see other women as long as he loves her (154-55). This is a radical suggestion for two reasons. Firstly, the reader gets to know Florence as a conservative character. It is unexpected for her to propose such a break with societal norms. Secondly, the novel is written in 2007 but set in 1962, which was still a conservative time, prior to the years which made the 1960s a radical decade of reforms and open-mindedness (“The 1960s,” Web). This is also emphasized by the text itself:

This was still the era – it would end later in that famous decade – when to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure. (6)

[H]e was spotted in Putney High Street, pushing a pram, in those days still a demeaning act for a man. (39)

For Florence, the radical suggestion of having an open marriage would solve all their problems. It would make the marriage work, meaning that she could be with the man she loves despite her unwillingness or incapability of having a physical relationship with him. This is Florence’s first act which transcends conventional behaviour, and even though her worst fears prove to be true and Edward rejects her suggestion, for the first time, she realises what she wants to do in her life. More specifically, she realises what she does *not* want to do

and bears the consequences. She returns to civilisation strengthened, because she has learned to listen to her own voice and to not just act according to expectations and norms. Coming to the sea was necessary for her to grow into a mature person.

For Alison in *Temptation* the holiday by the sea is also connected to a realisation in her life. She has always tried to be the perfect wife and mother. Referring to Coventry Patmore's famous poem, one could easily describe her as "The Angel of the House." In her famous essay called "Professions for Women," Virginia Woolf refers to this poem metaphorically, calling a phantom within herself the Angel of the House. This phantom is described as "sympathetic," "charming" and "unselfish" and tells Woolf how to behave: "be tender; flatter; deceive ... Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own." At last, Woolf 'kills' this phantom as it "would have plucked the heart out of [her] writing" (Web). It is no longer surprising that Mrs Ramsey, arguably the main character in Woolf's sea fiction novel *To the Lighthouse*, dies. Just like Woolf's writing would have 'died' if the Angel of the House had taken over, Mrs Ramsey has to die because she is the perfect embodiment of this concept: She is a perfect hostess, wife and mother of eight children, and tries to please everybody. However, amongst everybody's expectations on her, she forgets the most important person: herself. Even though Mrs Ramsey does not come to this realisation herself, the text lets her die several years later suggesting that one cannot survive if one lives according to the Angel-of-the-House-concept.

In *Temptation* Alison seems to fall into a similar category, which the following passages demonstrate:

[S]he was frantic about being a mother. The fear she might drop him, the incessant worry that caused her to wake several times a night to check his breathing in the cot. (20)

She had to pull herself together and organise the children ... She would cajole them into eating something, mop up the milk they knocked over and finally set them free. Her own lunch would be cold by then and her temper frayed, but none of that mattered. This was what a mother did in the here and now world that you learnt to exist in. (99)

While this behaviour might still be considered normal parental care, the following two examples demonstrate that Alison takes her Angel-of-the-House-role very seriously: Firstly, when she finds out that she has a cyst in her breast, she thinks: "[Her son] still needed her and would for a long time to come. That's why she had to be here for him and for them all. That's why, during the previous three months, she had been too scared to talk to anyone" (13). She does not even tell her husband, and even manages to have the operation done without his

noticing the “tiny neat stich on the underside” (17) of her breast afterwards. Secondly, even when about to make love with her husband, she cannot forget the children for a fraction of a second: “[P]ure instinct made her slide out from under Peadar and go to fix the blankets [of her child Danny who might have kicked them off]” (39). This destroys the mood between the married couple and makes Peadar head for the bar instead. Even though there is a striking similarity between Alison and Mrs Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*, unlike Mrs Ramsey, Alison *does* realise that she cannot continue sacrificing herself like that.¹² It is on this year’s holiday by the sea that she comes to this realisation – a realisation which saves her life. The fact that Peadar has to leave her and drive home for work helps her acknowledge this realisation. She is left with the children at Fitzgerald’s Hotel by the sea for four days, during which she is given time to think and see her situation clearly. She thinks: “How long was it since she had felt this young, her nipple erect ... The tang of sea air” (221). Slowly but surely, she breaks out of the Angel-of-the-House-role. She is aware of the fact that Chris helps her do this: “[T]alking to him felt like a tiny air pocket in which she became an individual again and not just someone’s mother or wife” (142). She learns to speak up for herself when talking to Peadar on the phone (195). Also, she now has the courage to tell Chris off: ””Why must you always decide things in advance for me? Maybe you find it chivalrous but I think it demeans me”” (143). By the end of the holiday by the sea, Alison states: “Life felt different, every sensation magnified” (221), truly acknowledging her realisation and already implementing a new approach to life from now on.

These examples show that a break by the ocean has a lasting effect on all the main characters of the three novels. Interestingly, when discussing these realisations in the characters, a distinct parallel to sea adventure fiction becomes visible. In the chapter on *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Coral Island*, I discussed how the sea makes the protagonists who they want to be, how they gain strength and self-confidence from facing it and, thus, how the sea serves as “a maker of character” (Bluefarb 510). This is what happens in all three contemporary novels, too. Even though there are no adventures set at sea, the sea certainly functions as a maker of character in these novels. The exposure to the ocean brings forth realisations in them which make them develop as characters.

¹² Mrs Ramsey does not come to a realisation by the sea, however, other characters in *To the Lighthouse* do. It is by the sea that Lily has her vision and finishes her painting after ten long years (154). It is by the sea that Mr Ramsey praises his son for the first time, which is untypical for the cynic person he is. The following words suggest a realisation in him: “he might be thinking, I have reached it. I have found it” (153).

On the way towards these realisations in life, the characters perceive the sea as both a positive and a negative force. According to Friedman, characters “feel a common hilarity, a sort of exhilaration at the sight [of the ocean.] But characteristically, the mood turns” (73). I will first discuss how the sea as a setting can be considered a positive force on the characters. After Anna has died in *The Sea*, it is in the aftermath of a dream that Max remembers his childhood by the sea. After he wakes up he states:

Immediately then, and for the first time in I do not know how long, I thought of Ballyless and the house there on Station Road ... and it was as if I had stepped suddenly out of the dark into a splash of pale, salt-washed sunlight. It endured only a minute, less than a minute, that happy lightsomeness, but it told me what to do, and where I must go. (26)

Max connects positive memories with the sea, and it is these positive memories which make him decide to go there in the first place. Once he gets there, the sea remains a positive force on him at first: “[T]here was the same sense of everything drenched and jewelled and the same ultramarine glitter on the sea. I felt inexplicably lightened; it was as if the evening ... had temporarily taken over from me the burden of grieving” (146). This passage shows the great extent to which the sea can affect characters. For a moment, Max is so overwhelmed by the beauty of it that he manages to forget his grief. For the first time in a long time, he is reminded of how content he actually was with life, at least prior to Anna’s illness: “Before the pit opened under our feet ... I was often surprised to ponder how many of life’s good things had been granted me ... This is remarkable, I think, even allowing for my present sorrows” (93). Throughout his time by the sea, he keeps reminding himself that the sea has always had this positive effect on him. Remembering how he climbed a tree as a child, he writes: “At this height the breeze was a steady flow of solid air ... I could see ... a tiny silver ship propped motionless on a smear of pale sea ... I had by now forgotten Chloe’s forgetfulness, so exultant was I and brimful of manic glee at being so high and so far from everything” (228-9).

In *Temptation*, memories of events which took place by the sea can also trigger positive emotions. When Alison, for example, thinks back to when she and Chris met on the beach when they were young, she connects happy memories with the setting, thinking: “How a body feels at eighteen. Intoxicated by life. A sea breeze. Blossom hanging down onto the roadside” (104). She associates the sea breeze with the happy memories of being young again. Being by the ocean again, meeting Chris and breathing the sea breeze – all of these bring back these positive emotions in Alison, which are connected to the sea. Knowing the positive force of the sea on her, Alison takes her children for a walk on the beach:

Within minutes sulks were forgotten as the boys threw stones into the waves and carved their names on wet sand ... The further from the hotel they went, the more carefree Alison became. This was what a holiday was about, even if Peadar wasn't here to share it. The perfect greeny-blue of the sea, the miles of deserted strand. (158)

Here, the sea functions as a positive force both on Alison and on her children lifting everybody's mood. This is also the case with Chris. He tells Alison about an event when he played golf and got a hole-in-one "with the Irish Sea below and the Mourne Mountains covered in cloud across Carlingford Bay ... The shot of a lifetime. And just me there" (122). Being by the sea makes Chris feel at peace with himself. How inspiring the sea as a setting is for him can also be seen early in the novel when he watches a ferry depart the distant harbour. Watching the ferry, he makes plans to travel abroad and make a new start in life (107-8). Later on he tells Alison: "'I was up early, down on the beach. The blueness of the blue waves, everything looks so special.' 'Why?' 'A different light. I might stick around a while longer.'" (142-3). It is not clear to the reader what exactly has changed. However, this passage shows that the sea as a setting is such a powerful force to Chris that it changes him for the better: "There was a new calmness about him, a serenity even" (197). "He walked ... plainly savouring the sea breeze against his face. Alison had never seen him look so much at ease with the world" (200). With the ending of the novel in mind, one might ask whether Chris really derives positive emotions from facing the sea just like Alison does. After all, how positive a force can the sea be if Chris decides to drown himself in it? However, I would argue that Chris's decision to drown himself does not derive from facing the ocean. On the contrary, even though the ocean cannot make Chris forget the death of his wife and children, and cannot prevent Chris's trying to kill himself, it is strong enough to temporarily lift his mood and give him moments of feeling "at ease with the world." Thus, the sea works as a positive force on both Alison and Chris in *The Sea*, be it only temporary.

On Chesil Beach is the only novel where the sea does not work as a force from which the characters can derive high spirits. Before Edward and Florence come to the sea for their wedding night, nature is a source of happiness and inspiration for them. Edward "liked to leave the cottage in the early morning, before even his father was awake, and saunter through the noise of birdsong down the lime tree avenue" (128) and Florence is "exultant from the beauty of her walk. [Edward] had never seen her so happy" (129-30). Being outside in nature is inspiring to both of them: "On strolls through the beech woods, [Edward] dreamed of a series of short biographies he would write of semi-obscure figures" (45) and they would spend hours "on the riverbank in the soporific heat ... listening to wavelets pattering under

the boat” (57-9). On “walks over Port Meadow, upstream along the Thames” (122), they talk about their ambitions in life. Note that these examples all refer to episodes in their lives prior to their wedding night by the sea. When they first come to the sea, these positive feelings connected to nature continue, but not for long. In the beginning of the novel, the setting shows itself from its most beautiful side: “The rising mist continued to unveil the nearby trees, the bare green cliffs behind the lagoon and portions of a silver sea” (25). Also, we read about their plans for the future, which are “as richly tangled as the summer flora of the Dorset coast, and as beautiful” (6). However, the more we proceed in the narrative, the more the mood changes for the worse. It becomes more and more unlikely that the characters should derive positive emotions from the sea, be it ever so beautiful. If circumstances had been right, for two people who love nature, the sea shore would have been the perfect setting to celebrate. Instead, as it is now, both characters find themselves in a state of emotional pain and anger. Instead of celebrating, they turn to the ocean for consolation. Even though the characters cannot derive positive emotions like happiness from the sea, it is still a powerful setting to them. Edward in particular feels a certain connectedness and stands “in cold and righteous silence in the summer’s dusk” (166) on the sea shore. The sea helps him to keep focusing on the injury Florence has done to him, which justifies his letting her go. For Florence, it is the endlessness of the sea, standing on “Chesil Beach with its *infinite* shingle” (4, *my emphasis*), which makes her realise that “what they had here, on the shores of the English Channel, was only a minor theme in the larger pattern. She could already see ahead. They would have this row, they would make up, or half make up ... and then the expectations would be laid on her again. And she would fail again” (146). This realisation helps her to remain strong, too. Thus, the sea, even though not a source for positive emotions, helps the characters in the long run: they derive clarity from it which resolves their conflict.

The passage from Friedman has already suggested that if the sea can be a positive force, it can also work as a negative force on characters. Coming to the sea and living in isolation for Max in *The Sea* means to engage in a lot of thinking about the past and the present. He does so especially at night and writes: “It was at night especially that I thought about the Graces, as I lay in my narrow metal bed in the chalet under the open window, hearing the monotonously repeated ragged collapse of waves down on the beach, the solitary cry of a sleepless seabird” (72). Listening to the sea at night triggers childhood memories in Max, and even though he can derive positive emotions from thinking back at first, he becomes increasingly sad and nostalgic about the past. Several critics argue that nostalgia is

an emotion often found in the characters of sea fiction who come to the sea in order to process the past:

Seasides awaken ... 'nostalgic,' ... examining the intricate workings of memory ... which reach back, longingly, to sunlit childhoods. (Feigel and Harris 9)

[A]fter the storms, the calms, the searchings, the escapes; after the recognitions and the revelations, nostalgia like the memory of an old love, survives. (Bluefarb 508)

Max does not become nostalgic immediately, but rather gradually, and this is when the sea starts to work as a negative force on him. The more he thinks back, the more he seems to associate negative feelings with the past, and this is reflected in his writing. He states at one point that "the past has a force so strong it seems one might be annihilated by it" (47). If he thinks about the past casually and positively in the beginning of the novel, he later becomes more and more obsessed by it and derives negative emotions from it. It becomes a matter of seriously thinking through the past and coming to grips with it, even with the painful moments. It is the sea which is associated with these nostalgic and melancholy thoughts; when listening to the waves at night, Max is drawn to them. Ironically, the sea continues to affect him negatively even on nights when it is calm and no waves can be heard:

Night, and everything so quiet, as if there were no one, not even myself. I cannot hear the sea, which on other nights rumbles and growls, now near and grating, now afar and faint. I do not want to be alone like this. [Addressing his dead wife, he continues:] Why have you not come back to haunt me? It is the least I would have expected of you. Why this silence day after day, night after interminable night? (247)

This time, he feels abandoned by the quiet sea, also deriving negative emotions from it. Were the sea less still, he could distract himself by listening to the waves crashing onto the shore. As it is now, still and quiet, Max feels deprived not only of his wife's but also of 'the sea's company.'

This quietness of the sea, not hearing it "rumble" and "growl," (*TS* 247) manifests itself in an increasing readiness for violence in Max. He states: "I do not want solicitude. I want anger, vituperation, violence" (149). He then starts a fight in the pub until people there threaten to summon the police (151-2). At last, when they have calmed him down, he falls "into a mood of bitter melancholy," deeply dissatisfied with his current life and writes: "Really, this is not like me at all, I do not know what was the matter, I mean other than what is usually the matter" (252). These examples show that Max's mind is strongly connected to the sea. Whether it is calm or furious, it still affects him. Sometimes this can be in a positive, sometimes – as these examples show – in a negative way. It becomes clear now why he has

trouble sleeping and why he “dread[s] the sleepless nights” (191). His only way of coping and getting at least a few hours of sleep is drinking:

Most nights I drink myself to sleep, or attempt to, with half a dozen bumpers of brandy ... The night is long, my temper short. Have I spoken already of my drinking? I drink like a fish. No, not like a fish, fishes do not drink, it is only breathing, their kind of breathing. I drink like one recently widowed – widowed? – a person of scant talent and scanted ambition, greyed o’er by the years, uncertain and astray and in need of consolation and the brief respite of drink-induced oblivion. I would take drugs if I had them, but I have not. (200)

Max lives in this unfortunate circuitry of listening to the waves, thinking and then drinking himself into oblivion for several weeks. Understandably, he gets more and more dissatisfied with his situation. He feels more and more disconnected from the sea and its surrounding nature. For example, he states: “Latterly, the sun for me is the world’s fat eye looking on in rich enjoyment as I writhe in my misery” (45-6).

Max admits that he “must take the world in small and carefully measured doses” and that coming to the sea is nothing but an escape from civilisation. He admits that “being here is just a way of not being anywhere” (192). His escape to the sea is initially important for him and the right decision as he can derive some positive emotions from it, but then he starts to feel the negative force which living by the sea has on him, too. According to Bluefarb this is often what happens with characters who try to find escape by the sea: “[I]nstead of finding escape, the escapers often only succeed in trading one daemon for another – the sea does not bring the balm of anaesthesia, but rather constantly serves to remind [the escaper] of his lonely estate” (503-4). This is certainly true for Max. Sometimes it is the silence at night by the sea shore which he finds disturbing and which emphasizes his loneliness. Sometimes it is the roar of the waves which trigger melancholy thoughts and make him feel nostalgic and lonely, too. Whether the sea is calm or furious, it is always present and certain to play a role in Max’s melancholy mood. Had he stayed any longer by the sea shore, his heavy alcohol consumption, causing his deteriorating physical and mental condition, might ultimately have killed him. This almost happens towards the end of the narrative when he heads for the beach with his brandy bottle, staggers, falls and passes out: “I lay there for I do not know how long, fluttering in and out of consciousness, unable or unwilling to move. It is a good thing the tide was on the ebb” (254). The fact that he is not only “unable” but “unwilling” to move reveals Max’s decreasing zest for life. According to Bluefarb, it “is the sea as antagonist—as malevolent antagonist—which seems to reflect the larger forces with which the soul of the seafarer must grapple. [T]he development of character ... proceeds from it” (505). It is

perhaps exaggerated to describe the sea in Banville's *The Sea* as malevolent. However, it is true that it is a powerful force which affects Max strongly and which brings forth a development in him. As it increasingly affects him negatively, he realises that it is about time he gave civilisation another chance.

Even though the earlier discussion has shown that the ocean can work as a positive force on characters in *Temptation*, it is being on holiday by the sea shore which also brings forth melancholy thoughts in Alison. Thus, in this novel the sea also works as a negative force from time to time, similarly as in *The Sea*. Alison states: "As always on this beach, it was her parents she began to think of, their hopes and disappointments with her ... The future frightened her" (*T* 158). Earlier in the novel memories of her dead, unborn daughter come to her when she stands on the beach:

She stumbled over the sand, thankful the beach was empty. The tide was going out ... Evelyn, that was the name she'd chosen for her daughter. She would be eighteen now ... [Alison] hadn't felt the blues this badly since Sheila was born ... She swallowed hard, fighting for control. She was a grown woman on holidays, responsible for three children. (70)

Being exposed to the sea and the beautiful countryside surrounding it, Alison is reminded of civilisation, the exact opposite, and feels "sickened by the world" (141). She asks herself: "How could [her son] ever cope with the imperfect adult world that would be strewn before him like pieces of a clock taken apart and never quite fitting back together again?" (92). It is being by the sea which triggers these melancholy thoughts in Alison. Just as the exposure to the endless sea can bring forth positive memories and thoughts and lift her mood, it can also make her feel small and helpless and work as a negative force on her. This is the case in all three novels. It is never a question of one or the other, but rather the sea works both as parallel and contrast in all three novels.

Thus, just like in *The Sea* and in *Temptation*, the sea and its surrounding nature in *On Chesil Beach* emphasize negative emotions, too. This is the case especially with Edward towards the end of the novel, when the sea can be said to be a negative force on him. Prior to the wedding night, Edward has always felt the need to go outside when feeling dejected. When he learns that his mother is brain-damaged, he gazes out "across the field at the broad roads of buttercups parting just before the land fell away in a gentle incline towards the woods. It was a lonely sensation he was experimenting with" (72). Later in life, he develops "a taste for long moody rambles. It helped clear his mind to be out of the house. He often went along Holland Lane ... and then walked down the Hambleton valley to the Thames [savouring] the separateness he felt, which was both painful and delicious" (74). Edward does

not expect nature to lift his mood. He just wants to be ‘understood’ by it and feel connected to it. However, it is his and Florence’s wedding night by the sea which challenges this silent pact between him and nature.

Bluefarb states in his article on the sea in literature that “[t]he sea neither aids nor absolutely thwarts [the characters]. It is simply indifferent” (508). It is this very indifference of the sea which is a powerful presence in the novels. To Edward in *On Chesil Beach*, the sea’s indifference to his problem is a negative force, emphasizing his negative emotions. It is a catastrophe for both Edward and Florence, when their conversation ends with Florence leaving the beach and Edward letting her go. They love each other and it is the tragedy of the narrative that, despite this love, they do not find a way to become reconciled. When Florence walks away, a storm at sea would have been the appropriate objective correlative to mirror the mood of the two characters. Instead, nothing extraordinary happens. The sea is indifferent with “the breaking of small waves” and the “shingle gleaming in the pallid light” (166), not at all reflecting the broken hearts of the main characters. This indifference of the sea makes Edward weary at first:

The sound of waves collapsing onto the shore at regular intervals ... filled him with weariness; the relentless laws and processes of the physical world, of moon and tides, in which he generally took little interest, were not remotely altered by his situation. This over-obvious fact was too harsh. How could he get by, alone and unsupported? (131)

Later on, not receiving sympathy from nature makes him increasingly angry and makes him pity himself. He kicks “at the shingle with unashamed violence” (148), he spins “around and in his frustration hurled [a stone] towards the sea” (156), he walks “up and down on the exhausting shingle, hurling stones at the sea and shouting obscenities. Then he slumped by the tree and fell into a daydream of self-pity until he could fire up his rage again” (158). Edward should have had somebody to talk to in this difficult situation. He should have had somebody who listened to what he had to say, somebody who gave him a silent hug or compassionate look or nod; any gesture from a living creature would have helped. Instead, he is all by himself staring at an indifferent sea. The indifference of the sea is a negative force on Edward. It emphasizes his heavy emotions ranging between self-pity and anger.

The very indifference of the sea need not be a negative force on the characters, as is the case in *On Chesil Beach*. It can also be a comfort and make the characters’ problems appear smaller. In *The Sea* Max’s “life is changed forever” when he realises that he is in love with Chloe. The sea is indifferent to this realisation: “The little waves rise and plash, the ginger dog barks” (TS 33). After their first kiss, Max “touched a fingertip to [his] lips, the lips

that had kissed hers, half expecting to find them changed in some infinitely subtle but momentous way. [He] expected everything to be changed” (145). Again, the sea does not mirror this expectation. There is only “a red sail-boat ... setting off towards the horizon’s already dusk-blue distances” (145). However, Max is not affected negatively by the indifference of the sea. On the contrary, even though his own body is shaky and nervous, he can rely on the strong and endless sea which is not baffled by some small individual’s realisations or problems. It is a comfort to Max and makes him be drawn to the ocean even more.

The idea of indifference as something characters are attracted to is also taken up in the other works. The indifference of the sea stresses its greatness, endlessness and timelessness. This is expressed in the second stanza of Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach.” Referring to the “eternal note of sadness” the speaker writes:

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

Just like Sophocles heard the eternal note of sadness, the speaker of “Dover Beach” hears it now, and coming generations will hear it, too. Thus, the speaker shows an awareness that, while everybody has to die, the sea is endless. This awareness can also be found in Chris in *Temptation*: “[S]taring out to sea” (68), he tells Alison why he came here: “I’m learning to let go. That’s what coming here was about. The world doesn’t stop because of one accident. People have their own lives, in truth they haven’t time for someone else’s grief” (155). Staring out to the indifferent sea makes Chris realise that life goes on, irrespective of his own misery. The indifference of the sea is so powerful and appealing to Chris and other characters because of the honesty which is connected to it. When Chris describes the angry car-dealer he says, “I could drown myself in the nearest lake for all he cared. His eyes at least were honest. Honest indifference” (156). Contrasting his misery with the vastness of the sea, which undisturbedly continues to fling its waves against the sea shore, makes Chris see himself and the destiny of losing his wife and children in relation to the world. It is the indifference of the sea which shows Chris unemotionally but honestly that life simply goes on.

Disillusionment

This section will mainly deal with *The Sea* and discuss how a deep disillusionment with life in the characters is revealed in their relation to the sea. Discussing contemporary Irish fiction, McMinn states: “The kind of lofty disdain shown by so many of Banville’s characters – and by his literary persona – for the ‘real’ world is ... rooted in deep disillusionment with politics, Irish and otherwise” (82). If Banville himself is disillusioned not only with politics but with life in general, too, it is certainly reflected in his characters. Max in *The Sea* has a disillusioned approach to life. This approach to life is revealed not by the fact that he does not believe in God, but by his explanation as to why he does not believe in Him: “I do not entertain the possibility of an afterlife, or any deity capable of offering it. Given the world that he created, it would be an impiety against God to believe in him” (185). Max looks at the world negatively. He has “had the conviction, resistant to all rational considerations, that at some unspecified future moment the continuous rehearsal which is [his] life, with its so many misreadings, its slips and fluffs, will be done with and that the real drama ... will at last begin” (184-85). However, just one sentence afterwards he takes it all back stating: “It is a common delusion, I know” (185), coming back to being the realistic, disillusioned and negative person he is.

This disillusioned and negative way of thinking becomes especially visible when Max addresses death in his writing; in fact, death is a reoccurring theme in his narrative. He remembers “Chloe kneeling and looking out and Myles and [himself] on the bench.” Both Chloe and Myles die and he has stopped enjoying life and yearns to die, too.¹³ Thus he continues stating: “I am compiling a Book of the Dead ... She was the Sphinx and we the seated priests. There was silence, save for the crying of the gulls” (237). Interestingly, death is constantly connected to the theme of silence. Pondering over Chloe and Myles’ sudden deaths in the sea, Max asks himself:

What did I feel? Most strongly, I think, a sense of awe, awe of myself, that is, who had known two living creatures, that now were suddenly, astoundingly, dead ... This all is silence, save for the drowsy hum of summer. (246-47)

I brought out the car keys and looked at them in perplexity. Everything seemed to be something else ... The silence about me was as heavy as the sea. The piano on the dais grinned its ghastly grin. (65)

¹³ After his wife’s death, Max describes his life as “the delicate business of being the survivor” (185).

[T]he beach in the darkness, the sand cool on top but keeping still the day's warmth underneath, and the long lines of white waves breaking on the bias, lit from inside themselves somehow, and over everything the night, silent, secret and intent. (162)

It becomes clear why everything becomes worse for Max at night. It is at night that there is an unbearable silence which he connects to death.

If death and silence are two main reoccurring themes in the novel, the sea is the third theme. All these three themes – the sea, death and silence – are connected to each other and play a major role. Since his childhood friends Chloe and Myles have vanished in the ocean, Max connects it with death and constantly contrasts humans with it, and life with death. He is disillusioned, believing that both the sea and the countryside surrounding it are indifferent to death. When Chloe and Myles disappear in it, Max sees the “pale dots between pale sky and paler sea ... a splash, a little white water, whiter than that all around, then nothing, the indifferent world closing” (244). He is aware of the fact that the sea is dangerous and responsible for the deaths of many people. However, he is negative in blaming the sea for these deaths on a personal level, accusing it of being evil. For example, he writes about “the sinister, calm way [the tide] kept coming on” (236) the day Chloe and Myles disappeared and about “the darkening sea that seems to arch its back like a beast as the night advances from the fogged horizon” (137).¹⁴

This attitude stands in marked contrast to his carefree childhood. At least prior to the incident of Chloe and Myles vanishing in the sea, he was never afraid of it. The three children would swim “in sunshine and in rain,” “in the morning [and] at night,” and even “during a thunderstorm” when “a fork of lightning struck the surface of the sea so close to [them they] heard the crackle of it and smelt the burnt air” (135). However, on the day of the accident when his friends drowned, his relation to the sea changes to the negative forever. For the first time both he and his friends were made “uneasy by this waveless, unstoppable tide” (236), creating a foreboding that something bad is about to happen. Chloe's and Myles's deaths make Max stop swimming in the sea. He admits that he “fear[s it] a little” (112). This fearful relation to it never changes for the better. In particular, the last two pages of Max's diary show that, in advanced age, after all these years, he still connects the sea with death. When his wife dies and his life is changed forever, it is the sea he thinks of, remembering a special occurrence in the water as a child:

And in that moment, so calm and drear, I recalled another moment, long ago, in the sea that summer at Ballyless. I had gone swimming alone ... The sky was hazed over

¹⁴ This personification of the sea will be discussed in more detail in the section “The Sea as a Symbol.”

and not a breeze stirred the surface of the sea, at the margin of which the small waves were breaking in a listless line, over and over, like a hem being turned endlessly by a sleepy seamstress ... I was standing up to my waist in water that was perfectly transparent, so that I could plainly see below me the ribbed sand of the seabed, and tiny shells and bits of a crab's broken claw, and my own feet, pallid and alien ... As I stood there, suddenly, no, not suddenly, but in a sort of driving heave, the whole sea surged, it was not a wave, but a smooth rolling swell that seemed to come up from the deeps, as if something vast down there had stirred itself, and I was lifted briefly and carried a little way towards the shore and then was set down on my feet as before, as if nothing had happened. And indeed nothing had happened, a momentous nothing, just another of the great world's shrugs of indifference. A nurse came out then to fetch me, and I turned and followed her inside, and it was as if I were walking into the sea. (263-4)

Walking into the room where his dead wife lies, feels to him like walking into the sea. This climax at the end of the novel reinforces the title of the work. It becomes clear that the work is not called *The Sea* because it happens to be set by the sea, but because it is Max's main antagonist in his struggles to give life another chance. It is the only possible setting for Max to come to terms with death, and through that, with life. He struggles with death in isolation, in silence, and often at night. To Max, the sea's "shrug of indifference" is not unexpected. In fact, it reaffirms his disillusioned attitude to life.

McMinn argues that there is a theme running through Banville's fiction which is "a critical, even a nostalgic, defence of the classic modernists, the supreme artists of the early part of this century" (89). It is true that there are several traces of modernism to be found in *The Sea*, Max's disillusioned approach to life just being one of them. I have already mentioned that the narrative consists of discontinuous events. Sometimes, however, this is taken further and Max's language breaks down into fragments, which is reminiscent of modernist works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* or T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Max writes for example: "The café. In the café. In the café we." (145); "Smells of exhaust smoke, the sea, the garden's autumn rot. Brief desolation. I know nothing, nothing, old ape that I am" (214). Discussing Banville's *Birchwood*, Peach argues that, "the spaces between the fragments are important. Here there is silenced information waiting dormant and having the potential to erupt and disrupt when the fragments begin to cohere" (208). I am hesitant to agree that these fragments in both modernist literature and Banville's fiction are meant to cohere at all. Rather, they give the reader insight in the speaker's state of mind expressing the modernist idea that sometimes words fail to express what one wants to say. When Stephen in Joyce's *Ulysses* walks along the beach, he thinks: "These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here" (Part III, "Proteus" 55). The tide keeps washing over the sand. For Stephen,

the sand, which is exposed to wind, weather and the tide, stands for language – language which has been used so often that it has become empty and meaningless and fails to express what he wants to say.

Fragments might also stand for the idea that the mind randomly associates and does not consist of exclusively coherent strands of thought. Banville makes use of fragments and the stream-of-consciousness technique in *The Sea*, both of which are characteristics of modernist literature. He also applies the depressing, cyclic model of history, the core of many modernist works, which expresses the conviction that history reoccurs in cycles; it cannot be stopped, nor can one leave a trace in it. This depressing conviction is embodied, for example, in the character of Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses* (Part II, "Lestrygonians" 208) and in the speaker of "The Second Coming" (1921), by the poet W.B. Yeats. In *The Sea* Max writes:

It does not last, it cannot, it is not immortality. We carry the dead with us only until we die too ... I remember Anna, our daughter Claire will remember Anna and remember me, then Claire will be gone and there will be those who remember her but not us, and that will be our final dissolution. (119)

Similarly to modernist writers, he expresses the disillusioned conviction that we cannot leave traces in this world and will be forgotten. In Eliot's *The Waste Land* the speaker expresses the same conviction in a more metaphorical way: "The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers; Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends; Or other testimony of summer nights" (*The Waste Land* lines 179-99). Life is so painful to him that he loathes spring, which stands for the beginning of yet another circle:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow. (lines 1-6)

Just like the speaker in *The Waste Land*, both Max and his wife Anna in *The Sea* find winter soothing and connect it to forgetfulness:

Throughout the autumn and winter of that twelvemonth of her slow dying we shut ourselves away in our house by the sea ... Anna dreaded the coming of spring, all that unbearable bustle and clamour, she said, all that life. A deep, dreamy silence accumulated around us, soft and dense, like silt. (153-4)

In order to completely absorb the silent forgetfulness of winter, Max and Anna do not just lock themselves into their house in the city; they choose an exile from civilisation and come to the sea for this exile. Even though it is soothing for them, both are aware of the fact that

their temporary retreat by the seaside is going to end in death. They live there until they cannot procrastinate any longer and have to face reality: They withdraw from life until Anna's illness forces them to come out of their "deep, dreamy silence." Max's coming to the sea one year later, after the death of Anna, is similar in that he feels the need to escape from civilisation, from life. For him, there is nowhere else to escape but to the sea. He states: "[W]inter, indeed, is my favourite season" (252). Winter becomes the antonym of life for him. Similarly, as when his wife was sick, Max still does not want to face life and prefers to live in isolation by the sea. He lives like that until he is *forced by the sea* – I am referring to the occurrence on the beach, which almost kills him – to give life another chance. This is similar to *The Waste Land* where water imagery is also connected to life. It is the "spring rain" which forces the speaker of the poem to face spring again in April. Just as the spring rain is connected to life, the sea also forces Max to face life again.

In discussing sea fiction of the nineteenth century, Raban argues that "the sea was the realm of man as solitary creature, the hero struggling with elemental forces, and to go to sea was to escape from the city and the machine, and from the regulated and repetitive patterns of life in a complex industrial society" (15). Even though Max and Anna only come to the seaside to live there temporarily, they feel the same urge to escape civilisation as sea fiction characters of the nineteenth century. Also, illness and death make them feel just as disillusioned about life as the characters of modernist fiction. Thus, similarly to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the ocean in Banville's *The Sea* is both "cruel" and "a realm of escape and renewal" (Raban 30). His novel is a good example of how twenty-first century sea fiction imitates earlier sea fiction, while maintaining an original frame.

Similarly to Max in *The Sea*, Alison in *Temptation* is disillusioned in being aware of the danger of the sea. Despite the beauty of the sea, she does not underestimate the destructive power of it: When her daughter Sheila disappears, Danny suggests that she might be on the beach. Alison panics, thinking: "Nowhere was safe for kids, not even Fitzgerald's Hotel ... The tide was coming in" (200-1). When Alison goes to find Chris on the beach, she is frightened by the darkness knowing that "[y]ou could break a leg falling over hidden rocks and water" (180). However, despite reason telling her how dangerous it is, Alison ignores her fear and wades into the sea at the end of the novel in order to find Chris:

The water was bitterly cold, almost paralysing her. The force of the waves took away her breath ... She was going to die if she did not turn back. This was sheer madness ... The sea water was sickening, stinging her eyes, pounding in her ears ... This became no longer about Chris, it was about saving herself ... She tried to take deep breaths and not black out. She kicked out weakly, one arm around his neck, until

eventually she knew she could kick no more ... Hallucinatory images swamped her as she tried to stay conscious ... Another wave washed over them but they had almost reached the shore ... Alison was crying. Sand clung to her face and hair as she sank down. Her body twitched and shivered. (215-17)

This experience in the sea, which exposes Alison to the danger of it and almost kills her, is necessary for her in order to change her thinking. Had it not happened, she might have continued in her old ways. As it is now, she realises that, even though initially she sets out to rescue Chris, actually it is all about herself: “Suddenly it felt that she wasn’t just searching for Chris in those waves, she was looking for herself” (215). It takes an experience which almost kills her to wake up.

Focusing on an earlier novel by Dermot Bolger, *Father’s Music* (1997), Peach argues that “Bolger makes an important contribution to exploring in fiction subjectivity where the sense of self has been shaped by abuse and / or neglect ... The novel is a quest narrative” (132). This also applies to *Temptation*. Alison has not been abused but she has been neglected by herself, always setting her own wishes and needs last. The novel then is Alison’s quest to break out of the Angel-of-the-House-role. It is the experience in the dangerous sea – the scene when Alison rescues Chris from drowning – which finalises her change in thinking, made explicit in the kiss which follows it. For a moment, Alison explores what Peach calls “the concept of a second life” (127):

The warmth of his tongue against hers, its urgent probing, its quest for something tangible, something made whole again. Everything else tasted of sand and salt. The hotel seemed another world away ... Alison loved Peadar, she loved her children, but there was more to her than just them. (T 218-19)

Even though there are fewer traces of modernism in *Temptation* than in *The Sea*, it is the way the sea is described which shows parallels to modernist literature. The sea in *Temptation* is both “cruel” and “a realm of escape and renewal” (Raban 30); cruel because it would have killed Alison if Chris had not started to help her swim back and a realm of renewal because Alison leaves the seaside as a new person. The sea for Alison functions as a dangerous, life-threatening setting which changes her thinking.

The discussion of the sea as a negative force in *On Chesil Beach* has shown that Edward is also disillusioned with life and the sea, especially when he gets angry at the world and throws stones into it. However, the ocean is not portrayed as ‘cruel,’ which is the case in *The Sea* and *Temptation*. In fact, *On Chesil Beach* is the least dramatic novel: There are no “strange tide[s,]” no strange incidents in the sea and nobody almost drowning in it. In that, I agree with Seaboyer who argues McEwan’s work consists of, on the one hand,

“psychological realism, expressed in intensely focused explorations of individuals and relationships within a claustrophobic private sphere” (24) and, on the other hand, “[c]ausal realism, [and] the way our understanding of reality shapes our sense experience of it” (25). She concludes that “McEwan’s realism holds up a nicely polished mirror to show us reality” (32). The way the sea functions in *On Chesil Beach* gives space to both the psychological and causal realism, which Seaboyer discusses. Unlike the other two novels, the sea in *On Chesil Beach* does not act as active antagonist. Rather, characters keep their distance to it and do not actually interact with it.¹⁵ They do not swim in it or wade into the water except for one incident: “[Edward] stood at the water’s edge thinking about her, and in his distraction let the waves wash over his shoes” (158). Still, the sea is always there in the background and remains a powerful setting. Instead of focusing on occurrences in or by the sea, this approach puts the focus on the characters’ minds instead. While doing that, McEwan uses the ocean as a powerful ‘background setting,’ a setting which either mirrors scenes between Edward and Florence or is indifferent to the couple (as discussed in an earlier section). The sea also plays a major role in the novel when it comes to the mood which is created, and it is an important setting for the characters to digest the difficult truth and consequences of their failed wedding night. In contrast to *The Sea* and *Temptation*, *On Chesil Beach* thus embodies another approach as to how the sea can function in contemporary fiction. Whether it is portrayed as an active antagonist or as a passive background setting and realm of escape and renewal, it is powerful and affects characters strongly.

This section has focused on the sea as a setting and describes how exactly it affects the characters. It has shown that, whereas romantic writers were inspired by the sea and could see it as a positive force only (Raban 117), disillusionment in contemporary fiction undermines the sea as a solely positive force. Even though there are parallels to earlier sea fiction and literary epochs (for example modernism), all three novels are distinct and maintain an original frame.

¹⁵ It is true that Florence has a flashback of different ocean crossings together with her father. Even though these are scenes set at sea, they are not part of the main narrative. These crossings will be discussed in the next section called “The Sea as a Symbol.”

The Sea as a Symbol

Friedman acknowledges that “water imagery ... permeates [sea fiction] on both the literal and figurative levels as scene and as metaphor” (69) or, as I choose to call it, setting and symbol. While the first part of my analysis focused on the sea as a setting, the following section is concerned with the sea as a symbol. I have tried to keep the two functions of setting and symbol apart; however, it is important to point out that a clear distinction between the two cannot always be made. Thus, in some of the following examples of the sea taking on symbolic meaning in the novels, the sea actually operates as both a setting and a symbol at the same time.

According to Harte and Parker “[i]t is quite common ... to find traces of allegory embedded in the fabric of recent Irish fiction. The private individual experience often becomes an illuminative metaphor of the public and national destiny” (2). Not restricting myself to Irish fiction, I argue that traces of allegory in contemporary sea fiction can be found generally in the portrayal of the sea. It functions as a symbol in various ways, becoming a metaphor of either private individual experience or abstract concepts. As Raban puts it, “[d]escription is not the point. The sea exists to be listened to and decoded, an ocean of meanings and associations” (33). Judging from the analysis of the three contemporary novels dealt with here, I find there is a strong parallel to Romantic poetry which often contains sea imagery, personifications of the sea and symbols which describe it.

There is a repeated use of sea imagery when characters express themselves in terms of the sea. In *On Chesil Beach* Edward imagines how simple their relationship could be if Florence would be just as keen on having sex as he is:

[He dreams of] a dirty, joyous bare-limbed freedom, which rose in his imagination like a vast airy cathedral, ruined perhaps, roofless, fan-vaulted to the skies, where they would weightlessly drift upwards in a powerful embrace and have each other, drown each other in waves of breathless, mindless ecstasy. It was so simple!” (96)

Hearing the breaking waves from a distance, he dreams of making love and describes it as “waves of ... ecstasy,” clearly inspired by the setting which surrounds him. Edward seems to choose the breaking waves as a metaphor for making love, because they are powerful and, at the same time, not within reach. Just as the sea can only be enjoyed from the distance and cannot be touched without standing on slippery ground, Florence’s body is also refused to him. Edward knows that every time he gets too close to her, she withdraws her body and becomes “remote, perhaps disappointed, or even faintly betrayed” (22) and that “[s]udden

moves or radical suggestions on his part could undo months of good work.” This is why the powerful but distant sea with its breaking waves becomes a suitable metaphor to describe the potential emotions of making love. At another occasion love is described in terms of waves: “[Edward] was discovering that being in love was not a steady state, but a matter of fresh surges or waves, and was experiencing one now” (125). Here an abstract concept – love – is expressed in terms of waves. Thus, the language of the narrative often reflects the setting it describes. This phenomenon can also be found in the other two novels. In *Temptation*, for example, there are expressions such as “to leave somebody stranded,” which reflect the novel’s setting by the ocean: “It was Peadar’s fault for leaving [Alison] stranded here without a car” (130). In *The Sea* the language of the sea can be found in similes, for example when Max describes “[t]he silence about [him as] heavy as the sea” (65). A little later he states: “What a little vessel of sadness we are, sailing in this muffled silence through the autumn dark” (72) – an example of how the setting, which surrounds him, can influence Max. The implication seems to be that the sea is so powerful that even the language of the novels is inspired by it; it contains sea imagery to express something which is not at all related to the sea from the beginning.

Coming back to *On Chesil Beach*, “a great fallen tree” reminds Florence of the power of the ocean: “She was leaning back against a great fallen tree, probably thrown up onto the beach in a storm, its bark stripped by the power of the waves and the wood smoothed and hardened by salt water” (141). Florence is aware of these strong, natural forces of the sea. In fact, some passages suggest that she even ascribes powers to it which are beyond the law of nature: The sea for Florence can not only strip, smoothen and harden wood; it is so powerful that it can also *do* something beyond its natural force. There is a strong emphasis on the sea breeze in *On Chesil Beach*. Even though Edward and Florence cannot see the sea while they lie down on their bed in the hotel room, they can feel the sea breeze, smell it and hear the waves from a distance. The following passages show how the sea breeze functions in the text:

[Florence] felt the summery air through the open window tickling her exposed pubic hair. (101)

Cool air travelled pleasantly over her bare legs. She listened to the sound of Edward undressing. Here came the past anyway, the indistinct past. It was the smell of the sea that summoned it. (99)

In seconds [slime from another body] had turned icy on her skin in the sea breeze, and yet, just as she knew it would, it seemed to scald her. (105)

The sea breeze is personified in the first two passages as it “tickles” and “travels” over Florence’s legs. Also, the narrative stresses that it is the smell of the sea which triggers thoughts about the past, and not Edward’s undressing. In a way, this also gives the sea, the smell of the sea, powers beyond its natural ones. It makes Florence remember boat trips with her father on “the ridiculously named *Sugar Plum*, which he kept down in Poole harbour” (50). Her father used to take Florence out with him on several ocean crossings, and even though it is never explicitly stated, the text suggests strongly that it is on these trips at sea that he sexually abused his daughter (99-100).¹⁶ Thus, having been sexually abused at sea while feeling and hearing the waves pounding against the boat and smelling the sea breeze, Florence cannot help connecting the sea with these unpleasant memories. Now on her wedding night with Edward, being close to the ocean again and, above all, hearing Edward undress, the memories do not only come back to her, she also seems to see her abusive father in Edward. However, instead of accepting this truth, she “blames” solely the smell of the sea for her remembering her father and what he did to her, not Edward undressing. It shifts blame from Edward onto the sea, thus it personifies the sea, to say that it triggers unpleasant memories in her. Even though she seems to be quite unaware of this projection, it shows how powerful the sea is to her. Florence believes it to be capable of doing more than toss its waves onto the shore; even if it may be disturbing, she gives it credit for being able to summon the past in her.

Friedman argues that the past is connected to a static water image as the characters are detached, and the present to a dynamic one as the characters are involved (71). This shift from the past and its static water image to the present and its dynamic one is to be found in *On Chesil Beach*: When Florence has run away from the hotel room, Edward is left behind and engages in a lot of thinking about their relationship. The narrative dedicates twenty pages to an analepsis into the couple’s shared past with Edward being the focaliser (111-131). Notably, it is the sea which brings Edward back to the here and now: “The sound of the waves collapsing onto the shore at regular intervals broke in on his thoughts, as though suddenly switched on, and filled him with weariness” (131). At first, Edward is so immersed in his thoughts that he does not notice the sea. It is there in the background but it is not mentioned throughout these twenty pages. This makes the sea static; it is silent and lets Edward think. This changes suddenly when the sea is “switched on” and its waves can be

¹⁶ She was twelve years old, lying still like this, waiting, shivering in the narrow bunk with polished mahogany sides. Her mind was a blank, she felt she was in disgrace ... [H]er father was moving about the dim cramped cabin, undressing, like Edward now ... Her only task was to keep her eyes closed and to think of a tune she liked. (99)

heard. If the sea can be switched on like a machine, again, it is invested with a meaning beyond what it can actually have. Also, it shows how a dynamic water image is immediately connected to the present of the narrative. The sea is such a powerful force that it can bring characters back to the present; it can distract them from what they were thinking about.

In *Temptation* the sea is also powerful and, moreover, a symbol of Alison's temptation. When Alison hears Chris' solitary footsteps approach her, "her nipples felt as if sea air was stiffening them again ... She had never looked at another man nor wanted the touch of one before. But Chris wasn't just another man" (173). Since lunch with Chris on the beach twenty years ago, Alison connects positive memories with the ocean; memories of being young and carefree. Moreover, the sea air stiffening her nipples indicates that the sea is also connected to her sexuality and becomes a symbol of her temptation. When Chris and Alison stand in front of the hospital, she does not "even know who moved their head first, just that suddenly the temptation was there. For the shock of one single moment she had her arms around his neck and they kissed" (126) – they kiss "with the dark sea before them" (131). Of course, the mere fact that they kiss close to the sea does not necessarily personify the sea or give it symbolic meaning. However, the sea is *too* present to just be a background setting. It is always there, hovering in the background, and seems to be watching Alison. She cannot escape its intent stare, even if she tries to: When they drive back after the kiss, she tries to persuade herself that, "[s]he was a happily married woman. Chris was a widower. It didn't matter what her body told her ... She blocked out the feel of Chris's skin, the memory of the warmth of his hand" (130). Still, the wild, untameable sea continues to rage, just like her inner tempest of emotions. Discussing *To the Lighthouse*, Friedman argues that "the water imagery becomes now a symbol of the search for human contact and warmth, or of the brute force of the natural cycle" (70). This seems to also apply to *Temptation*. The powerful sea, which is always there in the background, becomes a symbol of Alison's internal turmoil of opposing emotions. It becomes the embodiment of her temptation to have sex with Chris despite being married to Peadar.

The sea as a symbol of Alison's temptation also reinforces the title of the work, which is a narrative set by the sea. When Alison gets back to the hotel room, we read that "[t]he sky had grown black with more rain clouds, the roar of waves almost lost behind the double-glazing. Her child was safe, life went on. But she wanted to see if Chris would surreptitiously cross the gravel again, inches from her but not knowing she was there" (133). When Alison is back inside without Chris, refusing to give in to her temptation, the roar of the waves is also almost silenced by the double-glazing of the windows. It can still be heard a little, just as

Alison still wants to watch Chris wandering the gardens. However, at least for this night, her temptation to do something forbidden is just as silenced as the roar of the waves, which the windows block out. Just as the sea cannot be heard as strongly when inside, her temptation has weakened when inside. It is the outside, the outside by the sea, which is connected to her temptation to act unrestrainedly and the sea is a symbol for that. After all, the three kisses between her and Chris all take place outside by the ocean, never indoors (63-4, 126, 218).

The sea in *Temptation* is not only a symbol of Alison's temptation; it also constantly reminds her that she has to change something in her life in order to be happy again. The novel starts with the following sentence: "I gave up my happiness to make another person happy." Alison thinks this key statement on various occasions throughout the narrative (3, 40, 85). Connected to it is an image of her dead body floating in the sea; an image which constantly reminds Alison that continuing to act out the Angel-of-the-House-role will surely kill her sooner or later, and that she has to do something now in order to prevent this from happening. This first occurs in the vivid dream, which Alison has the night before they drive to the seaside. When she wakes up in the middle of the night, the images of her nightmare come back to her:

What was the dream she was trying to block out? At first all she could remember was water, a tang of salt on her lips, fear ... An image [of a] woman's face under water, trapped at the window of a capsized boat. Skeletal, the flesh half gone, bony hands upright where they had beat against the glass. Eyes that had not yet been devoured, staring out ... the drifting seaweed, the huge eyes of striped flatfish ... It was she who was trapped in the wreckage ... her sagging breasts ... Her right nipple half eaten away by some dark sea creature. (3-4)

This image of her dead body floating in the sea visualizes her potential tragic death as a result of self-sacrifice if she continues in her old ways. It repeatedly reoccurs throughout the narrative at moments when she is weak and falls back into her old thinking. When Peadar heads for the bar without sleeping with Alison, we read:

She lay curled in the dark. I gave up my happiness to make another person happy, she found herself thinking, to make my family happy ... But what do I need? The image returned from last night, a woman swaying under water, her lifeless hands against the glass, waiting to be chanced upon by some diver. (40-1)

The image also reoccurs when Peadar arranges to drive back to Dublin without checking with her first: "Peadar was patiently explaining how he had no choice ... Alison found herself switching off ... That dream image came back ... [H]erself and Peadar were happy, but was she sure?" (84). Also, when she is at risk of drowning in the sea, she is reminded of her dream just when her "rush of strength [is] gone. [The image] frightened her into flailing out

her arms, yet she didn't know if she could even reach the shore alone" (216). Alison *does* survive the cold waves and makes it back to the shore, and it is not least because of the image from the dream that she survives and finds the energy to swim back to the shore. The image is always with her throughout the entire stay at Fitzgerald's Hotel. When she wakes up one morning, she feels "a tang of salt on her lips, a sense of water ebbing invisibly across the sheets, rocking her back into dreams" (6). It is being close to the sea, especially being exposed to the danger of the sea, which keeps the drowned woman vividly in her head. Had she not come to the seaside, she might have forgotten about the dream soon enough. As it is now, the sea becomes a symbol of action for her. It constantly reminds her that she has reached a turning point in her life and has to implement a new way of thinking. Thus, the sea for Alison functions both as a setting and a symbol.

Of the three, Banville's *The Sea* is the novel with the most personifications. I would argue that this is due to the form of the novel; a private diary of a character who lives in isolation by the sea. Max lives in solitude and rarely talks to people. Thus, subconsciously in need of human interaction, he starts to personify the sea, his only antagonist:

[I]t seemed quite natural to be sprawled there, in the dark, under a tumultuous sky, watching the faint phosphorescence of the waves as they pattered forward eagerly only to retreat again, like a flock of inquisitive but timorous mice. (254)

High tide here was never more than inches deep, the water racing in over the flats swift and shiny as mercury, stopping at nothing. (122)

The little waves before me at the water's edge speak with an animate voice, whispering eagerly of some ancient catastrophe, the sack of Troy, perhaps, or the sinking of Atlantis. (132)

These similes show that he takes his time studying the sea and that he takes pleasure in paying attention to detail. In the third example, he personifies the waves as creatures who whisper to each other animatedly about ancient catastrophes. This is reminiscent of the second stanza of Arnold's "Dover Beach," which I have discussed in the section on the indifference, endlessness and timelessness of the sea. The sound of the waves is associated with the "eternal note of sadness" which Sophocles heard long ago and which the speaker of "Dover Beach" hears now. Personifying the waves like that in *The Sea*, letting them whisper to each other about ancient catastrophes, suggests that Max is aware of the idea of the sea being endless and timeless and carrying the "eternal note of sadness." However, immersing himself completely in the sea does not seem to worsen his psychological condition, which was already bad at the start of the narrative. Instead, he seems to do it as a pastime when

there is nothing else to do. And as he comes to the sea all by himself with no concrete plan, he has plenty of time.

This casual pastime of immersing himself in the sea seems to become a pathological habit for Max resulting in nonsensical passages. Discussing Mr Ramsey in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Friedman argues that "his withdrawal from the life around him into his abstracted solitude finds its image also in immersion ... [E]ach character must immerse himself in the doubleness of reality [and] this process in one way or another usually finds its image in water" (72, 69). I would argue that there is a strong parallel between Mr Ramsey and Max as both withdraw from life into an abstracted solitude.¹⁷ It is not exaggerated to call Max's solitude abstracted. Sometimes he becomes confused about whether some incidents by the sea, which he writes of, are "real or imagined, [he does] not know which" (132). Mr Ramsey and Max are also similar in that their abstracted solitude finds its image in an immersion in the sea.¹⁸ Max immerses himself in his surrounding to such an extent that it becomes difficult to follow his narrative from time to time:

No, what I am looking forward to is a moment of earthly expression. That is it, that is it exactly: I shall be expressed, totally. I shall be delivered, like a noble closing speech. I shall be, in a word, *said*. Has this not always been my aim, is this not, indeed, the secret aim of all of us, to be no longer flesh but transformed utterly into the gossamer of un suffering spirit? Bang, crash, shudder, the very walls shaking. By the way: the bed, my bed ... (185)

This passage shows that Max's character is the embodiment of Banville's demand on contemporary fiction, which I quoted at the end of the historical background chapter: He is "honest enough to despair and yet go on; rigorous and controlled, cool and yet passionate" (McMinn 89). Despite being the disillusioned person he is, he can completely immerse himself in the sea.

It is true that there is a frequent use of symbols, sea imagery and personifications in the three contemporary novels; tools which are also commonly used in Romantic poetry. However, as the following personifications of the sea in Banville's *The Sea* show, unlike in Romantic poetry, the sea is not necessarily idealised. In fact, Max repeatedly personifies the

¹⁷ [A]nd then, as if he had her leave for it, with a movement which oddly reminded his wife of the great sea lion at the Zoo tumbling backwards after swallowing his fish and walloping off so that the water in the tank washes from side to side, he dived into the evening air. (*To the Lighthouse* quoted in Friedman 72)

¹⁸ It was [Mr Ramsey's] fate, his peculiarity, whether he wished it or not, to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, and there to stand, like a desolate sea-bird, alone. (quoted in Friedman 72)

sea in a way which deglamourizes it. To him, it is not just indifferent, dangerous and responsible for the deaths of Chloe and Myles; it is an evil “beast” which kills: He writes for example that a white seabird “plunged itself, a shutting chevron, into the sea’s *unruly* back” (62). He writes about “the small waves *creeping* over parched sand” (3, *my emphases*), about “the darkening sea that seems to arch its back like a beast as the night fast advances from the fogged horizon” (137), and he mentions the tide which for him is “unstoppable” and “sinister” (236). The sea air is described as “black and lustrous” (263) and has “something hostile in [it], too, the growling surliness of an old hound unable to understand where its beloved mistress has gone and resentful of the master who remains” (146). Moreover, the day Chloe and Myles disappear is repeatedly referred to as “the day of the strange tide” (3). The adjective “strange” is not a personification of the sea, although, it *does* seem to give the tide supernatural powers. Chloe and Myles are described as good swimmers “who clove the waves effortlessly” (135). Using “strange” as an adjective to describe the tide, insinuates that there was something ‘foul’ about the accident. In other words, Max blames the sea on a personal level for killing his childhood friends.

There are other passages in *The Sea* which do not necessarily suggest that the sea is evil, but they are still far from idealising it. The “harshest sea breeze” for example is described as “incapable of smudging” Rose’s white skin (225). Even more telling than using the negative verb “to smudge” for the harsh sea breeze is that Max points to the incapability of the sea. When Max has coffee with his daughter, we read for example that “[t]he waves clawed at the suave sand along the waterline, scrabbling to hold their ground but steadily failing” (59-60). Calling the sand “suave” personifies it in a curious way; it attributes confidence, elegance and politeness to the sand but there is also a subtle undertone of insincerity resonating with the word “suave.” Words like “claw[...],” “scrabbling” and “steadily failing,” which in contrast personify the waves, can be associated with despair, failure and inferiority. These human character traits suggest a power struggle between the sand and the sea, with the sea loosing over the sand. This shows that the personifications of the sea in Banville’s novel are very different from those of Byron, who idealised the sea and saw it only as a positive force. A possible reason for deglamourizing the sea in this way is Max’s dissatisfaction with his own life, his disappointment at how badly he is coping. When he sees himself in the mirror he is startled, admitting:

I have been elbowed aside by a parody of myself, a sadly dishevelled figure in a Hallowe’en mask made of sagging, pinkish-grey rubber that bears no more than a passing resemblance to the image of what I look like that I stubbornly retain in my head ... I have definitely something of the look of a hanged man. (128)

Idealising and praising the sea, his only antagonist, would make Max feel even worse. Instead, he chooses to personify it in the most negative way: He points to its weaknesses, to its negative ‘character traits’ and blames it for murder, all the while stubbornly retaining an image of himself in his head which reminds him of his better days.

While these examples from *The Sea* have shown that personifications of the sea need not necessarily idealise it as was the case in Romantic poetry, there are other examples which *do* fit the category; namely passages which romanticize the sea and the landscape surrounding it. This is even the case in Max’s narrative. Despite many negative personifications, deep within, Max loves the sea. Coming back to it is for him “like encountering an old flame behind whose features thickened by age the slender lineaments that a former self so loved can still be clearly discerned” (46-7). Here the sea is described as a woman who he used to love, and loves still, even after many years. Contrary to the idea of the endlessness and constancy of the sea, this personification suggests that the ocean ‘ages’ just like humans do but retains its initial attraction for Max. Encountering it again, he finds he loves it still. This passage shows that he can be very poetical and can appreciate his surroundings. He does this for example by connecting music to the past by the sea: “In the night as I lay in my bed in the chalet the melodies would come to me, a faint, brassy blaring carried on the sea breeze from the ballrooms at the Beach Hotel or the Golf ... *O darling lover lonesome moonlight kisses heart and soul!*” (162). Later in the novel, he gives nature credit for being rescued on the beach on the very night he passes out there. It was nature’s helping hand, which made the Colonel find Max: “He had to scout the beach for a long time, and had been about to give up the search, when some gleam from moon or brightest star fell upon my form, supine there on that stony littoral” (255). Thus, despite a negative approach to life, Max can also appreciate and romanticise the sea and the landscape which surrounds it.

Interestingly, Max’s romanticising the sea and nature reveals also his yearning to escape this life, to die or to be somewhere else, or to be someone else. His yearning is as ungraspable and difficult to pin down as the ungraspable, vast sea. When he stands in front of the mirror he has a vision of himself being by the ocean: “I see the black ship in the distance, looming imperceptibly nearer at every instant. I am there. I hear your siren’s song. I am there, almost there” (132). His yearning to leave this life behind is expressed with the help of sea imagery, in a vision by the seaside. It is connected to the sea, which spreads itself out in front of him, endless and timeless and unapproachable. According to Raban, “[t]he primacy of the self, and its essential nakedness in the world of nature and experience, is the cornerstone of Romantic theory” (13). Thus, it is Max’s “romantic gesture” to come to the “sea in search of

transcendent verities” (17), to romanticise the sea and to express his yearning to escape this life in terms of the sea.

This romantic gesture – to come to the ocean to yearn for death or another life – can also be found in the other two novels. In *Temptation* the sea is described in a positive way when Chris tells Alison about playing golf by the seaside. He states: “Teeing off up on dunes with the Irish Sea below and the Mourne Mountains covered in cloud across Carlingford Bay. A gale blowing, rain and spray in my face ... The shot of a lifetime. And just me there. Nobody else” (122). Even though this is a lovely description of the sea and the nature around him, Chris is unhappy. The question of how he can be happy if there is nobody to share this happiness with, ails him. Similarly to Max in *The Sea*, Chris yearns to escape this life. He looks out to the vast sea and “watch[es] the ferry. What direction was he going in afterwards, she wondered? France, Germany, Spain? How far had you to travel to start a new life?” (*T* 107). Unlike Max, looking out on the vast sea is not merely a romantic gesture of yearning for Chris. The sea is the concrete object Chris yearns for, because he connects it to his family. He spent several holidays together with his family at Fitzgerald’s Hotel by the sea, and thus, the sea is where he can feel close to his family. He tries to implement his yearning to be close to the ocean, and thereby to his family, by trying to drown himself in it. He tells Alison: “I wanted to die somewhere where I might feel close to them. I never expected to see you here” (220).

Alison also romanticizes the sea. She remembers an occurrence in the past “where the sea suddenly glistened into sight” (27), attributing positive memories to it. Contrary to Max and Chris, she does not want to die, but she has a strong yearning nevertheless; a yearning for a change in her life. This is connected to the sea and expressed when they first drive to the Hotel in the beginning of the novel:

They were here now, a turn left at a garage, a sharp right again and the railway bridge was before them. Soon the first glimpse of the sea. The children craned their necks forward ... They were excited, yet she wanted their excitement to be more. She half resented the fact they were not shouting with joy. She wanted brass bands, she didn’t know what she wanted. (29)

Even though she does not know why, she feels that “this year[‘s coming to the sea feels] different” (15). She is not quite aware of this in the beginning of the narrative, but the sea for Alison becomes more and more a symbol of change. This is why she cannot wait to get there on the drive, why her excitement to get to it trumps the children’s, and why she repeatedly goes to look at the sea, especially when everything gets too much for her. She connects the ocean to her yearning for a change in her life.

In *On Chesil Beach* there are also many passages which romanticise the sea, and similarly to the other two novels it stands in connection with the characters' yearning. The narrator describes "the silver sea" (25), the "delicate mist drifting in from [it]" and waves which make "sounds of gentle thunder [while] hissing against the pebbles" (5). Words like "delicate," "gentle" and "hissing" personify the sea in a languorous way. He writes of a "grey smoothness that may have been the silky surface of the sea itself" (18), which also romanticises the setting by the sea. Whereas the yearning of the characters in the other novels is connected to existential matters and their lives, Florence's and Edward's yearning is about the here and now. They yearn to escape from their present, awkward situations. Throughout their formal meal Edward hears "the call of the beach" (19), wishing to escape the restrained and slightly awkward meal. This personification suggests that the beach is connected to joy and freedom and recklessness. Thus, it becomes a symbol of the exact opposite of what Florence and Edward experience at the dinner table, namely restraint, pressure and discomfort. Just as Edward hears the call of the beach, Florence also wishes to escape to it a little later. This is the case when the expectations on her as Edward's wife threaten to overwhelm her in the hotel room: "[Florence] wanted to run from the room, across the gardens and down the lane, onto the beach to sit alone. Even one minute alone would have helped. But her sense of duty was painfully strong" (32). Even though her version of breaking free from tradition and expectations looks different to Edward's, the sea is a symbol of freedom for both of them.

The binary opposition between the sea as a symbol of freedom and the restrained reality of the couple becomes clear in this passage: "The altered breeze carried through the parted French windows an enticement, a salty scent of oxygen and open space that seemed at odds with the starched table linen, the corn-flour-stiffened gravy, and the heavy polished silver they were taking in their hands" (18). Edward and Florence are forced to adhere to unwritten rules, expectations and tradition, while outside, the pure and free sea rages unrestrainedly. It is the fresh sea breeze which slowly feels its way towards the hotel, trying to interact with its opposite: "Rising from his plate, mingling with the sea breeze, was a clammy odour" (19). As Edward and Florence slowly but surely make their way to the sea shore, they are being drawn to their exact opposite. Even though facing the sea makes them aware of their imperfect situations, their weaknesses and "the limits of the human" (Cohen 107), it also gives them strength. Facing their exact opposite, the constant, strong and endless sea, is what they yearn for.

When they are on the beach later on, facing the sea gives Edward strength to resist forgiving Florence (134). Earlier in the novel, he does everything to please her and is too polite to say anything which might upset her:

[I]t was not raining, but nor was it quite warm enough, according to Florence, to eat outside on the terrace as they had hoped. Edward thought it was, but, polite to a fault, he would not think of contradicting her on such an evening. (4)

It is standing by the vast sea which makes him act completely differently to what the reader is used to. Being small and insignificant in comparison to the vast sea and feeling humiliated by his wife and tricked into marriage, he is no longer able to control his anger. There is nothing left which could possibly make him fall back into his pattern of politeness and considerateness:

He had been patient, uncomplaining – a polite fool. Other men would have demanded more, or walked away. And if , at the end of a year of straining to contain himself, he was not able to hold himself back and had failed at the crucial moment, then he refused to take the blame. That was it. He rejected this humiliation. (134)
He was close to shouting now. ‘With my body I thee worship! That’s what you promised today. In front of everybody ... how *dare* you!’ (156).

All of a sudden, Edward finds his voice and expresses his emotions unrestrainedly.

For Florence, the exposure to the vast, strong and endless sea also makes her aware of how different she is compared to it. However, unlike Edward, she is not intimidated by it. In fact, she is the character who tries to overcome the opposition of the sea as a symbol of freedom and her own life which is marked by restraint, discomfort, tradition and expectations. By finding the strength to suggest an open marriage with Edward – one where he is allowed to see other women – Florence does all she can to break free from tradition and expectations. She does everything which is in her power to fill her life with the unrestrained freedom which is connected to the sea, thus, trying to deconstruct the initial binary opposition. It is the tragedy of the narrative that Edward fails to look beyond the horizon and see the generosity in Florence’s offer. It shows that his version of breaking free from tradition and expectations is connected to a joyous marriage with Florence only, and does not include thinking outside of societal conventions. Thus, the sea for him remains a symbol of a kind of freedom which he cannot reach. It remains his opposite, intimidating him; strong and endless, while he is weak. Standing on “Chesil Beach with its infinite shingle” (4), he sees his limitations and misery. When he remains on the beach after Florence has left, all he can do is suffer and savour “the injury and wrong and insult she had inflicted on him, elevated by a mawkish sense of himself as being wholesomely and tragically in the right” (157).

Interestingly, Edward acts contrary to the typical sea fiction character who, according to Bluefarb, chooses “to gainsay himself, blame himself, than to blame the sharks, the wind, the weather - or what finally contains them all, the sea and its indifference” (507). This is not at all the case with Edward. He seems to blame everything but himself, standing by the sea and throwing stones at it in defiance. Both Florence and Edward are thus drawn to the ocean, their exact opposite, and it gives them strength in various ways. It is a symbol of freedom, which can be juxtaposed to the restrained reality of tradition and expectations. However, the sort of joyous freedom, which the sea stands for, cannot be reached. As their versions of breaking free from expectations do not balance out, the binary opposition remains.

Whereas in *On Chesil Beach* it is the sea breeze which slowly advances towards the hotel, in *The Sea* it is the sea itself which comes closer and seeks to interact with the characters, who become the opposite of the sea: “The tide came up the beach all the way to the foot of the dunes, as though the sea were brimming over its bounds. In silence we watched the water’s steady advance, sitting in a row, the three of us, Chloe and Myles and me” (235). The three children watch the sea come closer as if they were sitting in the theatre, which shows how attracted they are to it, how thrilled to be witnesses to the spectacle. According to Feigel and Harris, being drawn to the ocean is about “the experience of being on the edge, caught between the vast sea and the small human pleasures of the shore” (3). Similarly to Edward and Florence, the adult Max is still attracted to the sea. He connects it to a genuineness which cannot be found in civilisation. In fact, civilisation is referred to in a negative way at all times. This is how he describes the summer of meeting Anna in London:

[T]he city, the smokestacks, the busy roads, the hunched houses, and all the little figures, hurrying endlessly, to and fro. (180)

[E]verything shimmered and nothing was real, or was real but looked fake, like that platter of perfect fruit in Charlie’s flat. (104-5).

[T]he air blue with exhaust fumes from the street outside and the honking of passing buses sounding incongruously like fog horns through the clamour and murk in the crowded rooms. (100)

Here, the sea seems to become the opposite of the artificial, dirty civilisation, which Max describes. Thus, as Raban argues, “[u]ncontrolled, unravaged, unbuilt-over, the sea was the last refuge of the free spirit ... of metropolitan London” (Raban 15). It explains why art historian Max should be drawn to it, “shaking off the cold present and the colder future” (*TS* 61) by the seaside. He can connect to the ocean better than to civilisation.

The sea in opposition to civilisation is not the only binary opposition in the novel. Peach finds also a “notion of duality [in] the opposition and confusion of dream and reality, and [in] the presence of twins[,] the two sides of human nature, and of nature itself” (210-11). Interestingly, both these binary oppositions are found in *The Sea*, and they are deconstructed when they interact with the sea. The first opposition of dream and reality is overcome when Max immerses himself in the ocean to such an extent that he starts mixing dream, visions and reality randomly, “exploring the possibility of transcendence” (Peach 198). Max writes:

I had felt myself break through the membrane of mere consciousness into another state, one which had no name, where ordinary laws did not operate, where time moved differently if it moved at all, where I was neither alive nor the other thing and yet more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world ... I was there and not there, myself and revenant, immured in the moment and yet hovering somehow on the point of departure. Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for leaving it. (97-8)

If Max admits to being in such a state of mind while writing his diary, his narrative cannot be reliable. In fact, according to McMinn, “Banville’s protagonists are in the process of constructing a version of their personal history ..., they openly acknowledge the imaginative, invented nature of everything they write” (86) – and this applies especially to Max. It is looking out to the sea and immersing himself in it which results in the unreliable narrative characteristic of *The Sea*. Thus, it is the sea which confuses the initial opposition between dream and vision on the one hand and reality on the other.

Peach’s second notion of duality, the presence of twins, is also deconstructed when they interact with the sea. Max is both fascinated and slightly repelled by the fact that Chloe and Myles are twins, discussing this phenomenon with himself for three pages:

They were twins. I had never encountered twins before, in the flesh ... There seemed to me something almost indecent in such a predicament ... there must be between them an awful depth of intimacy. How would it be? Like having one mind and two bodies? ... They were tied to each other, tied and bound. They felt things in common, pains, emotions, fears. (TS 80-2)

While they are similar in the fact that they are twins, Max also sees how different they are from each other, representing indeed two sides of human nature. Myles represents the instinct-driven, animalistic but also passionate side. He has been “mute from birth. Or rather, simply, he ha[s] never spoken” (82), has webbed toes (38), makes “dry little clicking noises at the back of his throat” (83), and with his “twig-like fingers,” he reminds Max of a dog he once had: “an irrepressibly enthusiastic terrier [which he] would cruelly beat, poor Pongo, for the hot, tumid pleasure [he] derived from its yelps of pain. [Max asks himself:] But was not I

too a little afraid of [Myles], in my heart, or wherever it is that fear resides?” (84-5). Chloe on the other hand represents rational behaviour and is self-confident, if not rude. Max admits that “[s]he was a cold-hearted girl, [his] Chloe” (115). Yet, he falls in love with her and glamourizes her standing by the sea: “Chloe was still standing in the shadow of the pine tree ... her face lifted, looking up intently [at] those white puffs of cloud that had begun to inch their way in from the sea ... Suddenly she was the centre of the scene, the vanishing-point upon which everything converges, ... high up in the limitless, marine sky” (123-4).

Chloe and Myles vanish, die and become one with the ocean which fascinates them. The text suggests strongly that their deaths are no accidents but that it is what the twins wanted:

[The twins,] wrapped there together, their backs turned to the world. Then calmly they stood up and waded into the sea, the water smooth as oil hardly breaking around them, and leaned forward in unison and swam out slowly, their two heads bobbing on the whitish swell, out, and out. (244)

This passage and their initial fascination for the sea make their vanishing in the sea meaningful. If Peach is right to see “the two sides of human nature” in the presence of twins, their deaths suggest that differences in human nature do not matter. Their deaths could teach Max that life is so short that one should not fret over differences. Discussing Banville’s novel *Birchwood*, Peach states the following: “As much as the novel interweaves its way between given binarisms – spiritual and physical, beauty and ugliness, order and chaos, law and lawlessness, fact and fiction – it tries to occupy a place outside binarisms” (Peach 216). I argue that this also applies to *The Sea*. It is the sea itself which interacts with the characters, certainly with Max, Chloe and Myles, in order to deconstruct binary oppositions and to remind them of their mortality and limitations. The constant possibility of the sea “trying” to get closer is also shown in this passage:

Below us in a hollow in the dunes Rose lay on her back on a beach towel with her hands behind her head and seemed to be asleep. The sea’s scummed edge was within a yard of her heels. Chloe considered her, smiling to herself. ‘Maybe she’ll be washed away,’ she said ... ‘I hope she gets drowned.’ (236-7)

The characters seem to almost expect the mysterious and uncontrollable sea to “wash away” Rose, just like it does with Chloe and Myles and almost with Max. Thus, the endless sea in Banville’s novel is a mysterious force which, by interacting with the characters, seems to emphasize the mortality of humans and, at the same time, seems to carry a *carpe diem* message to make the most out of a short life and to not fret over differences which do not outlast death.

In *Temptation* the sea also emphasizes the mortality of humans. The discussion of the novel has shown that the sea functions both as a setting and a symbol of Alison's temptation and yearning for change. However, it is also a force which quite literally reminds Alison of her mortality. After all, she underestimates the power of it and almost dies in its cold waves when she tries to rescue Chris. As with Max in *The Sea*, it is the immersion in the sea which makes Alison wake up and makes her implement a new attitude to life. Thus, I agree with Friedman who understands "the act of immersion as [an act of] surrender and transition" (69) in characters of sea fiction. It is the immersion in the ocean which brings forth a transition in Alison. The sea for Friedman contains "the watery element of transition" which makes characters gain new perspectives in life (79), and this is applicable to Alison in *Temptation*.

According to Friedman the sea also "functions in its double capacity as destroyer and preserver" (72) at the same time. My analysis of the novel has pointed to this double function of the ocean. It has shown that it is never a simple case of one or the other: the sea can act as both a positive or negative force, it can bring forth loneliness in Max or can make him feel connected to the setting and remember carefree childhood memories. The sea can be personified as an evil force, connected to death, or it can be romanticized and praised. Above all, what draws Max to the sea are the many similarities to himself that he perceives in it. McMinn argues that "Banville is continually preoccupied with the self, its fictions, subterfuges, illusions, and its special narrative ways of recalling and inventing the past. [Banville's fiction's] major narrative feature [is] that of the divided self" (91-2). Max is a character who is divided between wanting to live and wanting to die, between the past and the present, between living by the sea and remembering life in civilisation, and divided between his first love Chloe and his second love, his wife. It is true that "the writer who goes to sea finds himself confronting a disturbed reflection of his own age, personality and preoccupations" (Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea* quoted in Raban 3). Thus, it is because the sea reflects Max's division that he is drawn to it. The sea for him does not only function as both a setting and a symbol, it represents the same opposing forces which are to be found within Max.

This discussion has shown that the sea in all three novels functions not only as a setting but also as a symbol, and that it is never just a symbol of one thing, but rather multiple things with often opposing forces. Thus, I agree with Raban who argues that "[t]he sea is one of the most 'universal' symbols in literature; it is certainly the most protean" (3). Interestingly, despite being protean and having various different functions, the effect of the sea is the same in all three novels; it strengthens the characters and makes them return to

civilisation as changed persons who have become more mature. For example, when the time has come to leave the seaside, Max in *The Sea* says: “Well, it is no matter. There are other things I can do. I can go to Paris and paint. Or I might retire into a monastery, pass my days in quiet contemplation of the infinite, or write a great treatise there ... Oh, yes, life is pregnant with possibilities” (260). For the first time since the reader has known him, Max is positive and optimistic about life. The temporary retreat from life by the sea has done him good. This is also the case with Alison who states on her last night at Fitzgerald’s Hotel before returning home: “When had she last felt this special? ... She could see so clearly now” (222). In comparison to *The Sea* and to *Temptation*, Edward and Florence in *On Chesil Beach* feel least happy, if not to say utterly devastated, when they leave the seaside. Still, it is important to both of them to be by the sea before returning to civilisation in order to digest the difficult truth of their separate futures. Just as Max and Alison, they have developed and leave the seaside as changed, more mature people.

Conclusion

“The sea in literature is ...
the supremely liquid and volatile element,
shaping itself newly for every writer
and every generation.”
(Raban 3)

The aim of this dissertation was to analyse how the sea has shaped itself in the literature of the twenty-first century. There were two reasons for setting out on this adventure initially: Firstly, my favourite contemporary novels happened to be set by the sea, and secondly, I read the introduction to *Modernism on Sea* which provocatively states that “the seaside [in contemporary literature] has passed its prime” (Feigel and Harris 11). Vehemently disagreeing with this statement, I set out to analyse the sea fiction of today and contrast it with earlier sea fiction. I was interested to make out the elements which have survived into the twenty-first century and the changes which could possibly account for Feigel and Harris’s statement. Above all, I was interested in showing why the ocean, in my opinion, remains a powerful presence in literature for both the characters of the literary work(s) and for the reader.

The sea in contemporary literature remains a powerful presence because it fulfils the function to strengthen the characters. Even though they are in different situations in their lives, all the characters choose the seaside to perform different rituals. They do not go there for a leisurely swim but for a break from their hectic urban lives. What they expect from their retreat by the sea is silence and time; time to think about the past and the future, to suffer, to yearn and to find out what they really want in their lives. My analysis has shown that the sea plays an important role in all these expectations. It is by the vast sea that the characters can think undisturbedly and digest whatever they need to come to terms with. It is the sea that triggers thoughts about the past, positive emotions or at least clarity in the characters, but also negative emotions such as nostalgia, loneliness and frustration. Escaping from civilisation means to escape pretence, and this is what the characters have come to the ocean for. Even though it can confront them with a disturbing indifference, at least it is honest. This is how the sea functions as a setting; it is far more than a background setting and is given an important role in the narratives.

In order for the characters to have a realisation and to acknowledge their turning points in their lives, the sea operates also as a symbol from time to time. It does so by interacting with the characters: Be it the sea breeze slowly mingling with the clammy air at the hotel or be it the sea itself, the tide, which advances towards the characters – the sea is

laden with symbolic meaning. It invites the characters to contrast themselves with the strong, endless and timeless sea, which can be intimidating for them but can also give them strength. The characters immerse themselves completely in the sea and its surrounding nature for some time and give the sea supernatural powers. They personify the sea by blaming it on a personal level or simply addressing it as if it were a person or a supernatural force. They become inspired by it and use sea imagery for what they try to express. Either consciously or subconsciously, they let the sea become a symbol of change, sexuality or freedom; a symbol of whatever it is they have to grapple with in their lives at the time. It is letting the sea function as a symbol which makes the characters see more clearly afterwards. By the time they leave the sea, they know what they want, have grown more mature and are ready to face civilisation again.

In line with my claim in the introduction, my analysis has shown that there are elements of late nineteenth poetry and modernist literature to be found when the sea functions as a setting. The sea is often described in a muted tone in these instances, mirroring the melancholy, disillusioned characters. Little happens on the story level of the novels dealt with here. Instead, there is a focus on thought instead of action, especially in *On Chesil Beach* which is the least dramatic novel of the three, but also in *The Sea* and in *Temptation*. Despite some occurrences in the story time, characters often immerse themselves in memories of the past and do so standing by the vast sea. My second assumption was that the sea contains elements of Romantic sea poetry when it operates as a symbol. It is true that it is personified, often romanticised and connected to the characters' yearning for another life and for escaping their present situations, all of which can be found in Byron and Keats and other Romantic poets. However, the more I worked with the novels the more I came to realise two facts: Firstly, even though it was a good starting point to distinguish between the sea functioning as a setting and a symbol, a clear distinction between the two is not always possible. Secondly, at times when the sea *does* function as a setting, the sea portrayal is not always muted and serious, nor is the sea always idealised and romanticised when it functions as a symbol. Even though the novels certainly make use of features from earlier sea fiction, they use them in a new way and in unpredictable places. Thus, coming back to Raban's statement preceding this conclusion, the sea has certainly also shaped itself newly in the literature of the twenty-first century. The in-depth analysis has shown the volatility of the sea in contemporary literature; how it consists of the same opposing forces which the characters have to deal with, how it can mirror the characters or be indifferent to their problems, how it can work as a positive but also as a negative force. Furthermore, the analysis has shown that the sea, through this

volatility, is such a powerful presence that it can soothe and strengthen the characters, bring forth realisations and turning points and make them more mature and secure about their situations. I hope that I have shown that the sea is given an important function in contemporary literature and that it is far too present and far too powerful to be considered to have passed its prime.

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