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# Ethics of Empathy and Personal Shift in Lucy Caldwell's *These Days*

**Abstract.** The article discusses the ethics of empathy and personal transformation in Lucy Caldwell's *These Days* (2022). In this award-winning historical prose, Caldwell creates an alternative literary space to commemorate the victims of the 1941 Belfast Blitz. I aim to discuss her ethical perspective, which manifests in two key dimensions in the novel: first, by fostering empathetic connections with readers, and second, by illustrating the empathic interactions and transformative journeys of the novel's female characters. Furthermore, I draw on scholarly definitions of ethics and empathy to demonstrate how a strong emphasis on empathy characterizes Caldwell's ethical perspective. As *These Days* stages a fictional revisit to the tragedy and its impact on Caldwell's native city (Belfast), she vividly portrays human vulnerability and resilience through the female characters, who experience profound personal shifts through empathic encounters. This article demonstrates how *These Days* calls for human interdependence and, more crucially, considers the interconnectedness of all living beings as a profound source of solace in times of vulnerability and loss.

**Keywords:** contemporary Irish novel, historical Irish fiction, Lucy Caldwell, ethical empathy

## 1. Contexts

Lucy Caldwell (born 1981 in Belfast) is a prominent contemporary Irish writer, known for her novels, radio plays, and short stories. Her work, which includes the award-winning *These Days* (2022), centers on the human experience within the context of cultural landscapes.<sup>2</sup> The novel represents the 1941 Belfast Blitz primarily through the lens of a fictional family, highlighting the resilience and fortitude of the people during this historical tragedy. It explores themes of love, resilience, and the human capacity to endure hardship amidst the devastating backdrop of the raids that utterly transform the city and its residents. Caldwell states her motive to write the novel as follows: “[w]hat struck me most poignantly about the diaries I read, the memories of the people I spoke to, was the oddness of the delights the Blitz had unexpectedly brought.

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2 The novel won the 2023 Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction.

The acts of resilience. The fortitude” (“Behind the Book”). Accordingly, her prose not only commemorates the victims but also vividly portrays empathy and love amidst the horrors of war.

As for the plotline, *These Days* delves into the turmoil of the Belfast Blitz through the lives of the Bell family, focusing on the daughters and the mother. As Audrey, one of the former, approaches marriage, she realizes, with the support of her friend Doreen Bates, that she does not love her fiancé, Richard. Meanwhile, Emma, Audrey’s younger sister, harbours a secret relationship with Silvia, whose death in the raids adds significant tension and drama to their lives. Their mother, Florence, contemplates the meaning of belonging through recalling her deep-seated memory of a lost love (Reynard). As the four nights of bombing unfold, the Bell women not only confront the external horrors of war but also come to terms with the internal struggles and challenges of their relationships. In fact, the characters make an effort to find meaning in their lives through empathy during the raids, which ultimately obliterate their city.

This paper examines the ethics of empathy and personal transformation in the novel, exploring Caldwell’s ethical stance, which operates into two main layers: 1) engaging readers empathically through narrative voice and its shifts, 2) portraying empathetic encounters to enable personal shifts of the women characters in the novel. I specifically attempt to demonstrate how the novel reflects Caldwell’s ethics of empathy and how her writing provides solace through the experiences of her female characters. Additionally, my paper explores how the novel challenges stereotypical social expectations in interpersonal relationships. *These Days* portrays women whose devastating experiences of war lead them to a profound personal shift as they question their understanding of human connection. Similar to Caldwell’s short story collection *Intimacies* (2021), the novel reinforces the idea of human interdependence, but more crucially, it addresses the interconnectedness of all living beings as a powerful solace in times of vulnerability and loss.

## 2. Caldwell’s Ethics of Empathy

Both ethics and empathy are challenging concepts for literary analysis as they have always been difficult to define. Various definitions have been provided, discussing the limits of their indispensability for our human existence. Nevertheless, this section focuses on their connection to the novel after a brief theoretical overview of both terms.

As for the ethics, the debate goes back to Aristotle’s views when he discusses the significance of virtue, morality, and the necessary human characteristics to lead an optimal life. Echoing Aristotelian ethics, Michael Eskin (574) remarks on the connection between ethics and literature by stating that “verbal and filmic narratives perused from early childhood have been supposed to ensure, more or less successfully, the variously conceived good person.”<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Daniel R. Schwarz notes that literature prompts moral inquiries, encouraging readers to consider their conduct in specific scenarios and whether they should adopt a critical perspective

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3 Eskin also notes how ethical philosophy relies on literature, giving examples from the works of Wittgenstein, Derrida, de Mann, Harries and Nietzsche (574).

to assess its ethical implications (6). In the context of English literature, Bárbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina observe that from the 1930s to the 1960s, F.R. Leavis and his adherents emphasized the commendable attributes of the “great tradition” in English literature, developing a distinctive approach to ethical criticism that aimed to extract lasting moral wisdom from it (viii-x).

The trend of connecting moral values with literary works—or questioning their interdependence—had diminished by the 1980s, only to resurface with what is called “the ethical turn.” This phenomenon signifies a renewed focus on the ethical dimension of literature and the development of new analytical tools, following two decades of rejecting the traditional humanist critical approach, which was deemed outdated and inadequate for assessing literary value (Oñega-Jaén 57). The relevance of this ethical revival becomes even more apparent when recalling Emmanuel Levinas’s approach to human responsibility to the Other(s).<sup>4</sup> Levinas suggests that this responsibility “is an essential, primary, and fundamental structure of subjectivity” (95), as ethics possesses an imperative and irreplaceable nature, with more love to give and justice to seek (Marcus 48). For Levinas, ethics is the core meaning that shapes and fills human existence (48). Therefore, it is justified to claim, as the ethical turn reminds us, that a literary work possibly presents a significant stance of moral valuation.

Ethical resonance of a literary work may extend beyond the confines of the text. According to Todd F. Davis and Kennett Womack, considering the ethical implications of a literary work involves closely examining the challenges faced by characters in the text and reflecting on the moral questions the story raises in the reader’s own life beyond the text’s boundaries. They also note that “[e]thical criticism ... focuses upon the life of the author and how his or her own ethical or moral commitments have shaped the construction, production, and performance of narrative” (x). Alternatively, Hanna Meretoja (3) explores the ethical implications of storytelling, and her approach is called “hermeneutic narrative ethics”, which “emphasizes that interpretation concerns not only our engagement with texts; it characterizes our whole being in the world and is the basic structure of experience, narrative, and memory” (3). As she also notes, when individuals confront significant life events, integrate them into narratives, and recollect them with specific emphasis and perspective, they actively participate in the interpretive act of making sense of their experiences (3). A similar approach resonates in the ethical perspective that Caldwell presents in *These Days*, as evidenced by her subsequent comment:

You make the most of what you have, and life goes on, be it in the Belfast Blitz, or in the Troubles, or in Covid times. I felt this with a moral clarity and urgency such as I had never known. ... It

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4 Here, it is also crucial to note the role of Mikhail Bakhtin’s perspective in relation to ethics. Although Bakhtin did not provide a systematic ethical theory, his ideas on dialogism, polyphony, and the carnival suggest a relational and dynamic approach to ethics. His emphasis on the plurality of voices and the dialogic nature of understanding implies that ethical values and norms emerge through ongoing interactions and conversations, acknowledging the diversity of perspectives in ethical discourse.

became the work of my days to plot a course through the horrors of the Belfast Blitz, not stinting on the cruelty, the meaninglessness of so much of it, but showing how people survived, showing just how irrepressibly life does go on ... [so] it became more important than ever to capture [the people's] stories. ("Behind the Book")

Put differently, Caldwell aims to retell the stories of people from diverse temporal and geographical contexts by highlighting their resilience in the face of war's emptiness, and more crucially, she invites the reader to participate in this recognition. Caldwell's ethical approach in *These Days* echoes the concept of empathy, which, in its broadest sense, is the ability to understand another person's state and/or experience. An encounter with another person, reflecting Levinas's ethics, signifies "a bodily and emotional experience of an epiphanic nature" (Onega-Jaén 61). Consequently, empathy plays a crucial role in interpreting the ethical repercussions of a literary text. Therefore, the present analysis of *These Days* focuses on three key concepts: "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra 78), "broadcast strategic empathy" (Kane, *Empathy and the Novel* xvi), and "entangled empathy" (Gruen, *Entangled Empathy* 3). They are, as will be demonstrated after discussing various definitions of empathy, related to Caldwell's ethical response to the Blitz and the transformations experienced by her female characters in the aftermath of the bombings.

As mentioned earlier, empathy, similar to ethics, is a complex term to describe. In fact, Thomas Petraschka and Christiana Werner note that "it does not even have an agreed-upon meaning among philosophers and psychologists" (2). Virginia Held defines empathy as an emotion among sympathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness that "need[s] to be cultivated not only to help in the implementation of the dictates of reason but to better ascertain what morality recommends" (10). Likewise, Lori Gruen stresses the sophisticated nature of empathy by defining it as "an experiential process" that combines feelings and thoughts, where we acknowledge our interconnectedness with others (including animals) as well as being responsive to their needs, desires, and aspirations (*Entangled Empathy* 3). For Martha Nussbaum, empathy involves creative reimagining of other people's experiences (302). In other words, empathy enables us to understand more effectively what ethics considers essential: human interdependence.

Empathy manifests in diverse forms. R. J. R. Blair classifies the term into three categories, namely "cognitive, motor and emotional" (699). Cognitive empathy results in [the individual's representation] of the internal mental state of another individual" (699), whereas motor empathy occurs when "the individual mirrors the motor responses of the observed actor" (699). In emotional empathy, "[our] expression can be paired with the object in the environment that elicited the expression in the displayer" (704). Although each type has substantial cognitive implications, as they stress the human capacity to share others' feelings through interaction, emotional empathy does not always require human presence.

In a similar vein, Suzanne Kane highlights humans' vast capacity for empathy irrespective of physical presence. As she notes, "[w]e need not be present in the immediate audience to catch

the feelings of others” (*Empathy and the Novel* 6). She even takes a step further and states that exploring the lives of fictional characters allows us to imaginatively immerse ourselves in the circumstances, dilemmas, and desires of these human-like figures, some of whom represent socially or temporally remote people (101).<sup>5</sup> In fact, the present analysis refers to the ethics of empathy in Caldwell’s novel as partly stemming from the vivid depiction of the aftermath of the Blitz, which addresses a historical tragedy and provides a prominent example for Kane’s approach. In other words, the reader witnesses and possibly empathises with fictional lives that are shattered and transformed by the Blitz.

Caldwell’s ethical stance also relates to a type of empathy as a response to trauma, as *These Days* addresses a historical and mostly neglected traumatic event in Belfast. According to Dominick LaCapra, “historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it” (78). It results in a separation between emotions and their representation (42). Therefore, addressing trauma requires attempting to express and re-express emotions and representations in a way that might not completely overcome, but could somewhat counteract, a repetition or manifestation of this disabling separation. In this case, empathy encompasses a simulated experience where individuals situate themselves in the other’s position, acknowledging the uniqueness of that perspective and refraining from fully assuming the other person’s role (78). Similarly, *These Days* seeks to recount the historical experiences of fictional individuals from a different era and location, emphasizing their resilience amidst the desolation of the Blitz.

Both ethics and empathy affect human interactions and the interpretation of literary texts. In the case of *These Days*, Caldwell’s ethical stance resonates with the notion of empathy, which, broadly speaking, involves comprehending the feelings and experiences of others. Yet, the novel goes beyond the conventional ethical considerations of a literary work. As argued below, the personal shifts of the female characters in the Bell family occur only through empathic engagements. In other words, *These Days* emphasizes the importance of human interdependence, especially highlighting how the interconnectedness of all living entities offers significant solace during times of vulnerability.

### 3. Caldwell’s Literary Strategy to Foster Empathy in Readers

Caldwell establishes a strong connection between vulnerability and hope by utilizing various forms of empathy to highlight the ethical dimensions of her writing. As this section demonstrates,

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5 Kane draws attention to “strategic empathy” employed by authors to guide emotional experiences within their fictional works, with the goal of addressing a specific audience rather than encompassing every reader who comes across the text (*Empathy and the Novel* 142). She classifies three strategic empathy types as follows: “bounded strategic empathy” takes place in a certain group of people due to mutual experiences leading to similar feelings; “ambassadorial strategic empathy” addresses chosen individuals to frequently foster their in-group empathy with a particular objective in mind; and lastly, “broadcast strategic empathy” invites all readers to empathise with members of a group by highlighting shared vulnerabilities and aspirations (142).

she engages readers through different types of empathy and portrays the empathic encounters of her female characters as they undergo personal transformations. Significantly, the traumatic impact of the Blitz is framed by a hopeful perspective on the future for the female characters.

A key aspect of *These Days* is its invitation to witness fictional characters' stories set against the historical tragedy of the Blitz. Delving into how historical catastrophes and traumas shape the narratives of modern history, LaCapra coins the term "empathic unsettlement," which signifies "a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (78). The concept involves understanding another's position while recognising the differences and not fully occupying that position oneself. Caldwell's ethical empathy, in line with LaCapra's empathic unsettlement, is "perhaps [a] necessary affective response to the impact of trauma" (xxxix). Similarly to LaCapra, Kane affirms the concept of "narrative empathy," which differs from real-life empathy as it emerges from stories rather than immediate human interaction ("Affective Resonance" 202). Nevertheless, it can be equally intense when we emotionally engage with fictional characters, involving the sharing of feelings and perspectives through storytelling (202). In the case of *These Days*, exploring the lives of Blitz victims and observing their resilience in the face of adversity enables readers to draw connections to contemporary challenges, fostering narrative empathy and understanding for those who endure difficult times.

*These Days* also employs, in Kane's terms, "broadcast strategic empathy." This empathy type "calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations" (*Empathy and the Novel* 142). The very first example that signals the use of "broadcast strategic empathy" is the novel's forty-five chapters under the three main headings ("The Dockside Raid," "The Easter Raid," and "The Fire Raid"), which specifically address the Blitz. Apart from being referenced in chapter titles, this dreadful experience is vividly depicted in many parts of the novel. For instance, in "The Dockside Raid" section, the hideous atmosphere of the city is portrayed as follows: "the sky filled with coffins, coffin after coffin after coffin, ... drifting down over the whole of Belfast on pale white parachutes, in total silence" (Caldwell, *These Days* 32). In this poignant scene, the vulnerability among the residents of Belfast resonates deeply, mirroring the eerie silence of death itself.

Meanwhile, the vivid description of the falling bombs evokes a haunting resemblance to coffins descending from the sky, casting a shadow over the already tense atmosphere. Similarly, in "The Easter Raid" part, there are various scenes that describe the victims with all the gravity of the bombings, as in: "[a] girl of no more than twelve or thirteen with one leg burned completely through to the bone. A man with a metal bar protruding from his torso. Another young girl, without a mark on her body, but by the time she's reached them, no pulse" (127). The horror continues with the descriptions of the city after "The Fire Raid." The narrator states: "[i]t takes more than a week to complete the removal of the bodies" (254). "Belfast is finished, people say. There is no way we can come back from this" (255). As the main element of "broadcast strategic

empathy,” the common universal vulnerabilities caused by wars are highlighted through striking aftermath scenes to establish an empathetic bond with the readers.

From the war scene portrayals to narrative standpoint shifts, the narrator’s stance highly influences the potential for empathic connection in *These Days*. According to Kane, “character identification” is one of the key elements of empathy in fiction. It can potentially be achieved through character portrayal, subtle suggestions of characteristics, dependence on archetypes, degree of characterization, depictions of actions, roles in storyline development, quality of dialogue, and method of depicting consciousness (*Empathy and the Novel* 93). Kane further argues that it is not always necessary to imply emotions indirectly to achieve an empathic connection with the text since “direct description of a character’s emotional state or circumstances by a third-person narrator may produce empathy in readers” (*Empathy and the Novel* 95). *These Days* employs a third-person narrator that frequently adopts an omnipresent tone, advocating for the characters using inclusive pronouns like “you,” “we,” or “us”: “[h]ere we are, [Emma] thinks, bitterly, the eighth of April 1941, the pinnacle of Western so-called civilisation, hiding in a bloody wee cupboard under the stairs while the world ends around us” (Caldwell, *These Days* 11). The narrative voice often changes to establish a sense of immediate intimacy and an empathic bond with a character. For instance, the narrator frequently employs the first-person narration when Emma struggles to cope with Silvia’s death, allowing the reader to experience Emma’s grief not as a distant observation, but as a visceral, deeply personal process: “I don’t even have a photograph of us together ... how am I to bear the weight of all the things I will never know? All the ways I’ll never have you. All that we could have, should have, might have, would have done together” (176). Through this confessional tone, the narrative blurs the line between inner thoughts and direct address, as if Emma is speaking to both herself and Silvia’s memory. This deepens the emotional impact of her mourning and draws the reader into the intimate moments of her grief.

In a similar vein, Florence’s despair and inner turmoil as the mother of the Bell family are reflected through narrative shifts that can empathically engage readers. For instance, the narrator states, “she sometimes secretly thinks that the city around her should periodically erupt into barricades and flames” (94). Florence’s disrupted perception of the city’s destruction resonates with a common response to trauma and loss, enabling empathy as readers can observe the limits of her numbness and her wish to escape the loss of Reynard. Besides, the narrator highlights “what has haunted me most, what has come to feel most unbearable, are the things unsaid, the words unspoken, the touches untouched” (162–63). Once again, the immediate shift to first-person narration and the narrator addressing Florence as “me” enables an empathic bonding between the text and the reader as it generates a shared human experience of missed opportunities. Furthermore, the narrator’s assertive tone when Florence considers everything meaningless due to Reynard’s absence also reinforces that bonding: “just take it, take all of it, I want none of it, none of this, because none of it—how can it?—none of it matters” (94). Here, Florence perceives everything as meaningless in Reynard’s absence, paralleling Emma’s struggle to find meaning in life following Silvia’s death.

Despite the negative connotations of the Blitz tragedy, the narrator reminds the reader that there is always hope. For instance, after the first raid, people feel relief, as the narrator notes in a soothing tone, “it has happened, and look, it wasn’t that bad” (37). In another instant, the narrator walks through the minds of the characters as they think “[m]aybe the war will be an opportunity, ... to change the way we live, for good” (53). Florence echoes Caldwell’s aforementioned perspective on the persistence of hope and resilience in humans in times of difficulties, as evidenced by the following fragment:

But the times we live through, [Florence] thinks, ... have bred in us all a grim, stoical sort of endurance. After the Great War, and the civil war, and the shattering Troubles of the twenties, those hundreds of people dead ... After the unemployment and the riots of the thirties, the sectarian pogroms, the chaos, the roads blockaded, the burning, only half, a quarter of a mile away ... You’re not surprised by anything anymore: you shake your head and press your lips and get on with whatever else there is to be doing, make the most of things, make of what you have—what you’re fortunate, and yes, grateful to have—the best you can. (91)

The narrative voice shifts from the third person to the second person to address Florence directly. This employment of “you” not only creates an intimate connection between the narrator and Florence, but it also broadens the address to include the reader, inviting them to reflect personally on the themes of resilience and hope. By dissolving the boundary between narrator, character, and audience, the narrative voice reinforces the idea that hope is not merely a private sentiment, but a shared, collective responsibility. Lastly, the narrator asserts that “[o]ne has a moral duty not to think the worst” (161), thereby emphasising the universal expectation of hopeful prospects for the future.

By blurring the lines between the narrative voice and the use of inclusive pronouns, as well as the first-person perspective, the narrator not only reveals the characters’ thoughts but also represents the collective consciousness of those experiencing the Blitz, inviting readers to engage actively with the unfolding events. This approach ensures that readers are not mere observers but can deeply empathise with the women members of the Bell family and their surrounding circumstances. As a result, while the vulnerabilities caused by the raids are highlighted as part of the narrative’s “broadcast strategic empathy,” the narrator simultaneously underscores a sense of hope. This dual focus offers readers the opportunity to connect emotionally with the victims and see beyond their immediate suffering. Lastly, this narrative strategy emphasises the communal nature of trauma, resilience, and memory, portraying the events not just as isolated experiences but as part of a broader human struggle.



## 4. Societal Pressures and Internal Struggles of the Bell Women

Readers are more likely to empathise with fictional settings when they find them relevant to specific historical, economic, cultural, or social contexts (Kane, *Empathy and the Novel* 81). Caldwell's ethical and empathic stance also addresses heavy pressure on women within patriarchal social dynamics.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Audrey is stuck between the stereotypical patriarchal impositions on women and feels a deep urge to challenge them. For example, she continues to put on her red lipstick, despite the possible sexist reactions that she may receive from the men around her (i.e., her father, her boss, and fiancé):

In the ladies' cloakroom she daubed, then more confidently dragged the lipstick back and forth until her lips were a full, luscious red. Father disapproved of young women making themselves up too heavily. Mr Hammond would no doubt disapprove too. And Richard. Oh hell's bells, she said aloud, let them, and she blew a ruby kiss at herself, to the amusement of the attendant on her stool in the corner. (Caldwell, *These Days* 13–14)

As she finds herself between the social norms and her desires, she struggles to align with societal expectations and asks herself, “[w]hy do I always try to make people like me, to prove I’m no different to them?” (14). Furthermore, the raids and her relationship with Richard force her to think “how strange it is, on which we find ourselves, the things we, really, have no choice or say in, the ways we blindly go through a life in which the grooves are already set ...” (25). Here, the grooves symbolise the pre-established societal norms that Audrey is often compelled to follow, presenting her vulnerability and lack of control over her life due to many social aspects. For instance, upon accepting Richard's marriage proposal, she feels “swimmy” and “she thinks with a start that she won't be going to work much longer, not once she's Mrs Richard Graham, not once she's Dr Graham's wife” (29). Audrey's feeling of dizziness echoes the sway of her career and future. Furthermore, her thoughts reveal the pressure on women to conform to traditional roles upon marriage, emphasising the sacrifices they often make, particularly in the context of Northern Ireland in the 1940s.

Audrey's conundrum regarding her future with Richard solidifies when she becomes close friends with her colleague Doreen Bates. In addition to being a “keen reader of fiction” (50) like Audrey, Miss Bates presents the ideal image of a woman that she wishes to resemble. As the narrator notes, “[Miss Bates is] already an inspector, higher grade, and will probably be given her own district soon” (39), and possesses a high cultural and intellectual capacity. Furthermore, the subversive nature of Miss Bates's life, as exemplified by being described as “a career woman” (52) and her experience of pregnancy out of wedlock, demonstrates to Audrey the possibility

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<sup>6</sup> According to The Northern Ireland Women's Policy Group (WPG) April 2022 research report, 91.2% of women consider that Northern Ireland has a prominent problem with men's violence. For the full report, see <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

of alternative lifestyle preferences. Nevertheless, Audrey attempts to justify herself for quitting work after marriage when she makes mistakes at work: “Maybe this, she thinks, is why women should stop work once they’re to be married: why some say, and maybe rightly so, they shouldn’t be in the workplace at all” (48). Besides, she silences her inner voice as the narrator notes “[s]he knows he’s right, of course. He’s being protective of her—cautious, sensible” (60). Here, the narrator exemplifies the familiar patriarchal voice that Audrey feels obliged to listen to.

Similar to Audrey’s personal dilemmas arising due to patriarchal repression, Emma secretly explores her sexual identity due to her fear of social reactions. As Emma’s same-sex relationship challenges the heteronormative codes at the beginning of the 1940s, she thinks about how her sister Audrey is “lucky” (107). Emma wishes that “[she] could have Sylvia over like Audrey does Richard” since Emma considers that Audrey does not need to explain herself to her family for having a heteronormative relationship (112). Furthermore, she only comes to terms with her sexual identity after experiencing her love for Silvia. At first, the narrator addresses Emma as “a prisoner of her racing thoughts” (4) and how she discreetly contemplates her secretive ideas only at night, as observed below:

There is a strange stark clarity to the thoughts you have at 4 a.m. ... You seem to know things, at those times, that you cannot articulate in the day. About who you are, and how you should be living your life. (4–5)

As Emma struggles to find her life path, she considers that “[t]here is nothing from this life that [she]’d save” if something were to happen to her due to the bombings (7). Yet, the only motive that maintains her vitality is her urge to confess her romantic feelings to Silvia. When Emma finally spends a night with her, she “[feels] an irrational lightness come over her, a giddy sense of possibility: [she] can do, now, [she] can be, anything that [she] want[s] to” (76). In both cases, Caldwell’s ethical and empathetic perspective highlights the plight of women due to internal struggles arising from patriarchal social dynamics, as portrayed through the experiences of both sisters.

Similar to her daughters Emma and Audrey, Florence undergoes various internal reflections about her life, including concerns about ageing. Her age amplifies her sense of vulnerability and marginalisation within the societal structure. The narrator depicts the evolution of Florence’s life and her changing roles in the family, which are one of the main inquiries regarding her life:

How is it, she sometimes thinks, that this is her life, that here she is, a wife of twenty-two years this September, mother of two adult daughters, of a baby son already matching her for height? One year in the not-too-distant future, quite possibly a grandmother. Granny Flo! How on earth can it be? (90)

The narrator’s rhetorical question, which reflects Florence’s surprise at her ageing, resonates with the common human perception of how rapidly life evolves. Here, Caldwell’s literary approach

affirms Kane's following claim: "[t]hrough fictional characters, we can imaginatively inhabit the circumstances, dilemmas, and desires of person-like figures, some of whom represent socially or temporally remote people" (*Empathy and the Novel* 101). In addition to human inquiries at the universal level, grief and loss at the personal level play a significant part in generating empathy in the case of Florence, similar to that of Emma. For instance, the narrator depicts Florence's deep and lasting suffering for her lost baby, stating, "she always privately thinks, to Olivia, though she never knew if that baby was to be a boy or a girl" (Caldwell, *These Days* 92–93). Florence convinces herself of the inevitable nature of death: "We each die alone. That is the terrible truth, the tragedy of it. Whether we die by ourselves or with a dozen others, in a loved one's arms or far from home" (131).

In addition to the shifting role in the family and the heavy burden of her unborn baby's memory, Florence constantly recalls her lost childhood love, Reynard. In fact, a part of her does not approve of the passing of time as the narrator asserts "no time has passed at all; at the same time she is Reynard's girl, now and always" (93). Furthermore, the narrator reveals Florence's deep attachment to him as she tries to imagine what it would be like if they had the chance to meet:

She sometimes imagines seeing him again, or him seeing her. ... She imagines them holding each other, weeping, helpless, all that's passed, these years between us now, and she feels it with a vertiginous rush, this waste, this sheer, unholy waste. (94)

Despite being "hopeless as she has known it is," Florence fantasizes about meeting her past love, and she deeply feels the overwhelming pain of the impossibility of recovering lost time (163).

Caldwell's ethical and empathetic perspective problematizes the struggles of women within patriarchal social structures. By vividly portraying the Bell women's problems, Caldwell brings to light the unique challenges these women face as they navigate both their personal quests for identity and the overarching trauma of the Blitz. Caldwell's depiction enables readers to connect more profoundly with the Bell women, making them more inclined to empathise with their multifaceted experiences. Through this approach, the author fosters a deeper understanding and emotional connection, enabling readers to better appreciate the complex interplay between the characters' personal struggles and the larger historical context.

## 5. Empathic Encounters and Personal Transformation of the Bell Women

Caldwell's use of empathy not only engages readers but also serves as a turning point for the novel's female characters, facilitating their personal growth. In a review, Joseph O'Connor asserts that "with great deftness [Caldwell] incarnates [the characters] on the page. ... Empathy lights the words" ("A Haunting Novel"). Significantly, the women characters in the Bell family also empathise with others (sometimes with non-humans) and experience their personal shift. Additionally, their questioning of the meaning of love provides them with a new perspective on the harsh conditions of the Blitz.

Firstly, Emma's life utterly changes when Silvia dies in the Easter raid. Her helplessness due to her lost love is partially recuperated when she finds a lost cat in the ruins of Silvia's building. As the narrator remarks from Emma's perspective, "it's my responsibility now" (Caldwell, *These Days* 219). According to Gruen, empathy has a close connection to the agency and "our agency is co-constituted by our social and material entanglements" ("Expressing Entangled Empathy" 458). Gruen explains "entangled empathy" as

[a] type of caring perception focused on attending to another's experience of wellbeing. An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities. (*Entangled Empathy* 3)

In other words, our ability to act, make decisions, and exert influence is shaped by both our social interactions and our physical environment. Therefore, we are not independent entities with fixed capabilities; instead, our agency emerges from the complex interplay between our social connections and the material circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Emma's entangled empathy is reflected through her adoption of the cat. As a part of the complicated nature of entangled empathy, the narrator reflects on Emma's dilemma following the adoption. While "[s]he cups [the cat] to her chest to keep it warm" (Caldwell, *These Days* 219), she also questions herself: "what on earth am I supposed to do when I'm next on duty? But what else could I have done, left you there? I should have. I should have just kept on walking" (220). Yet, this new pet not only enables her to find solace but also reassures her capacity to take responsibility. In fact, the cat reminds Emma about the uniqueness of human life and finally leads to her decision to be more independent: "[a]s the cat slunk away, she thought of something that Sylvia had said about Hindus: that they believed we must live hundreds of lives, thousands, as insects or animals, before getting one chance as a human" (145).

The Hindu perspective on the interconnectedness of all living beings resonates with Caldwell's ethical stance, emphasizing the importance of empathy across differences among living beings. Similar to the Hindu perspective, which views human beings as unique yet interdependent, Emma comes to realize her singular opportunity as a human being and comes to terms with her suffering. The narrator notes: "[y]ou have to close what remains of your heart to it. You have to walk on" (217). Furthermore, the novel's end is marked by the conversation between Emma and Audrey, in which Emma discusses her decision to live independently away from her family home. Emma's new perspective is depicted as follows: "this war could go on for years—for years and years—and I can't wait for it to be over for my life to start" (270). Moreover, Emma's resilient approach to life, which acknowledges the fact that "everything had to change at some point" (271), is reinforced when she says, "Come what may. That's what I keep saying to myself, come what may, come what may" (271). Here, Emma's courageous stance also implies

her empowerment in terms of her readiness to encounter any challenges regarding her sexual orientation. The narrator states that “[she] just want[s] a normal life. Or at least to be able to live [her] life normally” (271). This readiness to face potential adversity highlights her resilience and determination to live authentically, regardless of societal pressures or obstacles she may encounter.

Emma is not the only woman character who goes through a profound personal transformation through empathic encounters in *These Days*. Her sister Audrey often struggles to understand her true desires and aspirations in life, frequently striving to suppress her inner voice, which is not in favour of marrying Richard. This internal conflict persists until she experiences a profoundly empathetic encounter reminiscent of Emma’s, which compels her to confront her emotions.

Audrey’s oscillation between marriage and her own life choices halts when Richard has to leave the Floral Hall dance to provide medical care for the wounded following the Easter raid. As Richard tries to soothe Audrey for leaving her alone, he unintentionally voices the affirmation that Audrey needs to hear: “[y]ou don’t need me, ... You don’t need me, do you?” (119). Spending the night alone, mainly walking, and encountering a little lost girl on the street irrevocably changes Audrey’s perspective.

When Audrey encounters the little lost girl, Maisie, she is unsure of what to do at first. Yet, she immediately tries to find out where she lives. However, not encountering Maisie’s house among the ruined streets of Belfast, Audrey takes the little girl to her own house. Held notes that empathy is not only understanding one’s feelings, but also involves action: “even when one is just beginning to understand another’s needs and to decide how to respond to them, empathy and involvement are called for” (34). Similarly, Gruen’s aforementioned term entangled empathy demonstrates “an embedded and embodied process of moral perception” (“Expressing Entangled Empathy” 455). In other words, moral choices are directly linked to the inner workings of the agent—their thoughts, feelings, motivations, and experiences—and the outer structures of value around us, including societal norms and cultural influences (Gruen, “Expressing Entangled Empathy” 455). Audrey’s empathic reaction to Maisie not only presents an effort to understand Maisie’s vulnerability, but also symbolises an endeavour to comprehend and embrace her confused self at the edge of her personal shift. Notably, Audrey brings Maisie home, where she feels safe. When, some days later, Maisie’s mother is found and comes to pick her up, “she thinks of how lucky Maisie was that it was Audrey who found her, took care of her” (Caldwell, *These Days* 192).

The post-raid panorama and the empathic encounter with Maisie lead Audrey to change her mind regarding her future. In fact, she finally attempts, in Miss Bates’s terms, “[t]o live a life that, at least to yourself, is true” although “that’s too high a price to pay” (250–51). She confesses that she does not love Richard and her confusion about “what love is” (262). This instant signifies a pivotal change towards Audrey’s self-realisation. She finally understands that “[e]verything’s going to change ... In ways we don’t yet even know” (263). In other words, Audrey experiences a sudden realisation that her life is on the brink of significant and unpredictable changes. The shift in the narrator’s voice to

first-person in the following lines, “it’s the rest of my life that I haven’t been, and now I am” (263), indicates that Audrey finally begins to take control of her life. Here, Audrey embodies the possibility of change for women, transgressing the stereotypical roles that society attributes to them.

In the case of Florence, an encounter with a non-human entity initiates her personal shift. According to Nussbaum (302), empathy can involve a creative reinterpretation of another’s experience. She (302) states that “empathy is simply an imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience, whether the imaginer thinks the other person’s situation good, bad, or indifferent”. A similar phenomenon occurs when Florence sees a fox in her garden and perceives it as a return of Reynard’s soul:

Reynard, she says, with the very edge of her breath.

It seems too easy, too obvious, that he should come back as a fox, but there it is. She cannot explain it, she knows too that she never will, but in this moment she knows it, knows it beyond any doubt. His soul is free now. (244)

Reynard’s symbolic return signifies Florence’s finding closure to her suffering. Florence’s empathic recreation of Reynard as a fox provides her with peaceful solace and opens up the way for her personal shift. Significantly, her struggle to understand love and loss leads to a hopeful beginning: “I must try to see all of this as an opportunity – as a new start” (243).

Similar to Emma’s and Audrey’s positive changes in their perspectives towards life, Florence’s turbulent emotional landscape regarding Reynard gradually shifts with the Blitz. Her personal shift offers a hopeful ending, despite all the loss, pain, and questioning she experiences. For instance, she acknowledges that she is lucky to have everything despite the bombings (193). Besides, she develops new aspirations, thinking that she may still have a chance to study when the war ends (222). Overall, Florence’s profound emotional terrain fosters an empathic connection through shared human experiences involving love, loss, and the search for identity, culminating in a glimpse of her positive change.

Caldwell forges a strong link between vulnerability and hope by using various forms of empathy to emphasise the ethical aspects of her writing. She engages readers through diverse types of empathy, depicting the empathic experiences of Audrey, Emma, and Florence as they undergo profound personal shifts. Lastly, the trauma of the Blitz is contextualised by an optimistic outlook on the future for the Bell women.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

*These Days* establishes a fictional world inspired by a historical event and its victims, bridging the gap between distant fictional characters and the reader through empathy. The narrative voice highlights the characters’ efforts to find meaning and transformation amidst destruction, emphasising how the Blitz profoundly shapes their lives and identities.

Caldwell’s ethical perspective manifests in two key dimensions: firstly, by fostering empathetic connections with readers, and secondly, by illustrating the empathic interactions and transformative journeys of female characters. In the novel, the horrific scenes of the Blitz and its aftermath

are vividly portrayed. Additionally, the women of the Bell family, in particular, undergo significant personal shifts through empathic engagements amidst societal pressures and internal struggles. Audrey, for instance, clashes with traditional patriarchal expectations, but finds liberation through a deeply empathetic encounter during the raids, prompting a re-evaluation of her emotions and aspirations. Her sister Emma confronts the loss of her love, Silvia, due to the raids, but emerges resilient and determined to live authentically, despite societal pressures. Their mother, Florence, despite experiencing profound loss and pain from her childhood love, undergoes a transformative journey that culminates in a hopeful resolution, reinforcing the strength and adaptability of the human spirit.

As Caldwell commemorates the victims of the Blitz, her narrative transcends conventional ethical considerations, presenting empathy as a catalyst for both personal and communal transformation. Resonating with Nussbaum's perspective (302), the novel's ethical dimension fosters an understanding of the human experience, both individually and collectively, and catalyses the development of enriching human empathy. Like her previous work, *Intimacies*, *These Days* reinforces the idea that human interdependence and the interconnectedness of all living beings offer profound solace in times of immense loss and change. Caldwell's skilful portrayal of the Blitz not only honours the memory of those who suffered but also invites readers to engage deeply with the ethical and emotional dimensions of human resilience.

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