Alicante Journal of English Studies / Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses
ISSN: 2171-861X
Issue No. 42, 2025, pages 95-112
https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.26321

Vulnerability and Shame in the Writing of the Female Body: Emilie Pine's *Notes to Self*

Lucía Bennett-Ortega

Author:
Lucía Bennett-Ortega
University of Granada, Spain
luciabennett@ugr.es
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4100-6068

Date of reception: 02/11/2023
Date of acceptance: 10/12/2024

How to cite:
Bennett-Ortega, Lucía. 2025. "Vulnerability and Shame in the Writing of the Female Body: Emilie Pine's *Notes to Self*". *Alicante Journal of English Studies / Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 42: 95-112. https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.26321

Conflict of interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this article.

© 2025 Lucía Bennett-Ortega

Licence: This work is shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0): https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/

Abstract:
This article examines the representation of the female body in Emilie Pine's (2018) personal essay 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes.' Drawing on vulnerability studies and feminist criticism, I argue that the vulnerability and shame surrounding women's bodies are reframed as agentic forces, motivating Pine to craft a distinctly feminist narrative. Through a confessional and feminist style that resonates with French feminists' concept of "écriture féminine," Pine's writing transforms personal experience into political critique. The first part of the analysis is dedicated to the representation of the body and its vulnerability, especially in relation to the bodily elements of menstruation and scars. More specifically, I make use of Elaine Scarry's (1985) formulation of the stages of the "projection of the body," to examine the journey Pine undergoes in the conceptualisation of her own body: from being ashamed to unashamed. The second part of the analysis explores how Pine's style of writing leads to the reclaiming of the female body along the lines of what Hélène Cixous (1976) advocates in her influential essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa.' Ultimately, Pine's text illustrates a reconfiguration of vulnerability – not as something negative, but as a source of potential and resistance.

Keywords: vulnerability, menstruation, female body, écriture féminine, Irish literature, memoir

1. Introduction

> We teach girls shame. "Close your legs. Cover yourself." We make them feel as though being born female they're already guilty of something. And so, girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. They grow up to be women who silence themselves. They grow up to be women who cannot say what they truly think.
>
> — Adichie, 'We Should All Be Feminists'

Notes to Self (2018) is Emilie Pine's first collection of personal essays. Dealing with themes such as alcoholism, infertility, misogyny and rape, it has received several high-profile awards and has been described as "unsparing, formidable, raw" (Evans 2018), "wry and uplifting" (Jordan 2019) and "unflinchingly candid" (Harte 2020, 95). Particularly vivid in this collection is the essay titled 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes.' The essay reflects on what it means to be female in terms of the pressure that women undergo to be perceived as beautiful, pleasing, and clean. Pine narrates the experience of menstruation, exploring the myths, taboos, and shame that are built around it. In this article, I examine the representation of the female body in Pine's essay. My contention is that vulnerability and the shame associated with women's bodies are instrumentalised as agentic forces that impel Pine to write her piece and create feminist awareness. Moreover, through the narrative use of vulnerability, Pine's writing acquires a particular confessional and feminist style that echoes the famous French feminists' "écriture féminine" (see Showalter 1981, 185-186). To explore these ideas in depth, the second section of this article offers a critical discussion on vulnerability and its representation, while the third and fourth sections focus on a literary analysis of Pine's text. The third section is dedicated to the representation of the body and its vulnerability, especially in relation to the bodily elements of menstruation and scars. More specifically, I make use of Elaine Scarry's (1985) formulation of the stages of the "projection of the body," to examine the journey Pine undergoes in the conceptualisation of her own body: from being ashamed to unashamed. The fourth part of the article explores how Pine's style of writing leads to the reclaiming of the female body along the lines of what Hélène Cixous (1976) advocates in her influential essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa.'[1] Ultimately, Pine's text illustrates a reconfiguration of vulnerability—not as something negative, but as a source of potential and resistance.

1 'The Laugh of the Medusa' ('Le Rire de la Méduse') was originally published in French in 1975. This article references the English translation published in 1976.

2. Vulnerability: Ontological Category and Narrative Device

Thinking about vulnerability evokes a myriad of concepts, including harm, susceptibility, fragility, dependence, care, and resilience, among many others. This concept has been examined across various research fields, such as feminist criticism, vulnerability studies, law, sociology, and environmental studies (Fineman 2008; Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández 2023; Gilson 2014). The Oxford English Dictionary defines vulnerability as the condition or experience of being vulnerable. In turn, the adjective "vulnerable" is described as "that may be wounded; susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury" (Oxford English Dictionary). Taking this basic definition as a point of departure, we can begin to raise critical questions about vulnerability: Who is considered vulnerable, or susceptible to harm? Under what circumstances? Can everybody be vulnerable? Is vulnerability a universal experience? Scholars generally approach vulnerability in two primary ways. Some argue that it is a universal trait, representing an ontological condition inherent to all humans. This perspective views vulnerability as something intrinsic to the human condition (Butler 2004; Fineman 2008). Conversely, others conceptualize vulnerability as a condition specific to certain groups of people (Goodin 1985; Luna 2009). Alternative models to conceptualize vulnerability have also been proposed. For instance, Patrick Brown (2022) contends that vulnerability is not inherent, and certainly not confined to specific labels or groups. Instead, he posits that vulnerability is contextual, dependent on setting, interactions, and social processes. He emphasizes the need to "unlearn" common assumptions of who qualifies as vulnerable. Another approach is that of Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández's (2023) "ecology of vulnerability." In their volume *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature*, they argue that assuming a universal nature of vulnerability relies on ostensibly objective, quantitative criteria for achieving equality. For this reason, they advocate instead for a qualitative ecology of vulnerability that acknowledges overlapping capacities and symbiotic logics, thereby recognizing the relational and situational aspects of vulnerability.

This overview provides a broad mapping of vulnerability, since a more comprehensive elaboration is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, these ideas establish the foundation for my discussion and analysis of Emilie Pine's text. This paper departs from the idea that vulnerability is a universal ontological condition; that is, we are all (potentially) vulnerable, or as Gámez-Fernandez and Fernández-Santiago's state, "No*body* is invulnerAble" (2024, 9, emphasis and capitalization in original). Yet, it is essential to recognize that vulnerability is highly situated. Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds' (2014) dimensions of vulnerability are very useful to explain this idea of situatedness. They identify that humans

are vulnerable insofar as they are 1) embodied, 2) affective, 3) sociopolitical, and 4) embedded within an environment. This paper specifically focuses on vulnerability from a sociopolitical standpoint, examining the social pressures faced by women, particularly concerning their bodies, hygiene, and beauty standards. While acknowledging vulnerability as a universal condition, I focus on a specific configuration – one that is situated and attentive to relations of power and dependency (Masschelein, Mussgnug and Rushworth 2021). That said, it is important to recognize that these categories or dimensions of vulnerability are not mutually exclusive but rather overlapping and interconnected. In this case, while my analysis mainly concentrates on vulnerability in terms of sociopolitical conditions, and in particular the experience of being an Irish woman in the twenty-first century, it is closely intertwined with affective, psychological, and embodied vulnerabilities, highlighting how the interconnectedness of these dimensions lies at the core of vulnerability itself, a quality that many critics understand in terms of relationality and interdependency (Ganteau 2015).

Another aspect that must be mentioned is that vulnerability is not merely associated here with something negative. The narrow definition provided above – vulnerability as susceptibility to be wounded or to be harmed – represents only one facet of vulnerability and is often related to something that is primarily negative and undesired. This paper adopts a view of vulnerability that aligns more closely with understandings of potential, resistance, and creativity, arguing that Pine's essay serves as a textual representation of this resistance. In her influential publication *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, Erinn C. Gilson (2014) asserts that viewing vulnerability solely as susceptibility to harm is not only a reductive understanding, but also a devaluating one. She emphasizes the need to "challenge the normative construal of vulnerability as undesirable," suggesting instead that it is a condition of potential rather than merely one of harm (6). Gilson's notion of the elasticity of the term is particularly relevant here, especially in contemporary discourse, where there is a constant search for new concepts because existing ones are perceived as too fixed, rigid, or narrow to adequately encompass what we want to convey. This idea of elasticity invites us to recognize the many faces of vulnerability, suggesting that we can push, probe, and understand it in various ways. Also rejecting a negative understanding of vulnerability, Judith Butler conceptualizes it in terms of exposure and resistance. She highlights how our bodies are situated within the public sphere, leading to forms of exposure that can be both perilous and empowering (2004). Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay (2016) further argue that vulnerability does not merely signify fragility; rather, it can also be manifested as resilience and resistance in the face of societal pressures. This duality suggests that vulnerability encompasses the capacity to endure and challenge adversity, ultimately reinforcing the interconnectedness of vulnerability with agency and social justice.

Another approach to understanding vulnerability in a more positive and productive light is that of openness. Masschelein, Mussgnug and Rushworth (2021) foreground the ambivalence of vulnerability, not only looking at the side of fragility, victimization, or passiveness, but also its potential for openness, very much foregrounding the idea of relationality that I have already mentioned. Given that this paper focuses largely on gender – specifically gender norms, ideals, and impositions concerning the female body – the concept of vulnerability and its quality of openness will be examined from this standpoint. In 1986, Martha C. Nussbaum, coming from the field of ethics but attentive to vulnerability, posed the question "How far is human good living, *eudamonia*, vulnerable?" (318). She proposed a conception of well-being that embraces both its "masculine" (activity) and "feminine" (receptivity) dimensions: "a kind of human worth that is inseparable from vulnerability, an excellence that is in its nature other-related and social, a rationality whose nature it is *not* to attempt to seize, hold, trap, and control, in whose values openness, receptivity, and wonder play an important part" (Nussbaum 1986, 20). A decade earlier Cixous and Clément (1975) also addressed reductive binary categories and separation by proposing a feminine political economy based on this idea of openness. They related the activity vs. passivity categories not only to feminist reflection in general, but also to writing, which will be explored in this essay in relation to Pine's text. I am particularly interested in how openness materializes within the text, considering vulnerability not merely as a concept but as what Jean-Michel Ganteau terms "textual performance" (2015, 17). The following sections examine how vulnerability is employed in Pine's 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes' and explore how it can be useful to expand – and test the elasticity of – the definition and the many dimensions of vulnerability.

3. The Projection of the Body

Reflecting on Emilie Pine's *Notes to Self,* Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (2020) aptly observes that "it is the fragility of the writer's own body and life that forms the central theme of the bulk of the collection" (266). Indeed, vulnerability, which Ganteau describes as having "become a paradigm of the contemporary condition and of contemporary culture" (2015, 4), takes centre stage in 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes.' In Pine's text, vulnerability is deeply gendered, rooted in the sociopolitical condition of being a woman – or, in other terms, in the condition of deviating from the Western configuration of humanity tied to the masculine. Pine's exploration reveals how sociopolitical vulnerabilities, intrinsically related to embodied and emotional vulnerabilities, arise from societal assumptions, expectations, and judgments around womanhood. In particular, she addresses

how the female body is devalued and rendered invisible, contributing to feelings of shame, fragility, and concealment. In this section, I examine how Pine represents these pressures on the female body, how societal expectations generate vulnerability, and how she transforms this vulnerability into a form of resistance against gendered oppression.

In his exploration of vulnerability, Brown asserts that it is "neither enduring nor static" (2021, n.p.). This dynamic quality is evident in Pine's essay as vulnerability undergoes a series of stages in its representation, mirroring Elaine Scarry's framework for depicting the body. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World,* Scarry (1985) discusses what she calls the "projection of the body." According to her, people not only see, move, breathe, remember and work, but also project all of their actions and attributes outwards (284). Within this "phenomenon of projection" Scarry formulates three different stages in the conceptualisation and representation of the body (285). The first stage consists of perceiving the body as a series of parts, shapes, and mechanisms. This perception of the body is an external one. In the second stage, the body is conceived with respect to its capacities and needs. Accordingly, the understanding and the perceiving of the body starts moving inwards. Finally, the third stage is to understand the body as "'aliveness' or 'awareness of aliveness'" and "to reside at last within the felt experience of sentience" (285).

In 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes' Pine writes about the taboos and the shame that surround menstruation, and more generally, the female body as a whole.[2] Particularly significant is the underlying progression, similar to that of Scarry's stages of projection, in which Pine navigates through different ways of projecting her body. In the very first page of her essay, Pine writes "I have so much of this blood, this period blood, this pregnancy blood, this miscarriage blood" (109). This quote immediately conjures up Scarry's first stage of projection: the understanding of the body as a series of parts. Through the use of repetition and parallelism, which is one of the main features of Pine's style, blood is presented in an image of accumulation, but also of detachedness. It reads as if this blood were simply *there,* that is, as if it were independent from her body and not an intrinsic part of it.

Pine then turns to describing the time when she first got her period while at school, vividly recalling her feelings of mortification and her desire to distance herself from the experience (110). This marks the beginning of Pine's many references to her rejection of her own blood. In *The Second Sex,* Simone de Beauvoir (2010) stated the following on women and menstruation:

2 This article does not include the gender-inclusive language of menstruators, as Pine's essay explicitly makes reference to women.

> This is when she feels most acutely that her body is an alienated opaque thing; it is the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that makes and unmakes a crib in her every month; every month a child is prepared to be born and is aborted in the flow of the crimson tide; woman *is* her body as man *is* his, but her body is something other than her (emphasis in the original 41).

Admittedly, this passage can give rise to controversy as Marso (2012, n.p.) observes, and can even read as both melodramatic and insulting to women (Bauer 2016, 3). Nevertheless, I believe it draws attention to the fact that women often feel at odds with their own bodies, fostering an "othering" effect of detachment and rejection. As Pine herself comments, "at twelve I felt a lifetime of bleeding ahead of me. And I felt my body had let me down" (111). This statement underscores a distinct separation between "I" and "my body," as if they were not one and the same.

The source of Pine's sense of detachment is shame. Here, shame does not refer to a feeling of personal wrongdoing, but a collective fear of exposing one's vulnerability (Thorgeirsdottir 2020). Thorgeirsdottir explains that Western thought has traditionally constructed the concept of human around the masculine, leading to the exclusion and rejection of anything that deviates from this norm. The masculine is associated with autonomy, self-sufficiency, and reason, while the feminine is characterized by vulnerability, embodiment, and relationality. The rejection of the feminine fosters a gendered form of shame, resulting in micropractices, omissions, and assumptions concerning the female body. Consequently, Thorgeirsdottir argues that this pervasive sense of shame ultimately contributes to a disembodied perception of the individual. In her exploration of menstruation, Pine consistently references the shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and disembodiment she feels regarding her own body. Wood (2020) highlights that researchers and academics have long examined how society views menstruation as a taboo, framing it as not only shameful and repulsive but also stigmatizing for women (319). Pine reflects on this stigma while also addressing the shame attached to language itself, asking, "Where did I learn that these [blood and period] were shameful words?" (112). The significance of language in Pine's essay will be further explored in the second half of this article.

Menstruation is also perceived as disconnected from the body as it is related to a lack of cleanliness. Pine provides the example of advertisements for sanitary towels and tampons: "Blood is dirt. Isn't that what the label 'feminine hygiene' tells us?" (112). Hygiene and sanitary products are used to prevent menstruation blood from being seen. So much so, remarks Pine, that blood is represented in adverts as a "bright blue liquid" (112). In fact, Karen Houppert (1999) coined the concept of "the culture of concealment" to describe the way

in which taboos and stigma surrounding menstruation influenced women, often through sanitary products, leading to embarrassment and secrecy (as cited in Bobel et al., 319). The point is that still today, the only blood of the human body that is considered shameful is that of menstruation. Women are taught that menstruation is shameful and that it should be hidden from view, perpetuating a culture of female shame tied to its association with impurity or uncleanliness.

Nevertheless, as the essay progresses, Pine's projection of the body also evolves and gradually becomes "more interior in its conceptualisation" (Scarry, 285). As such, the text reaches Scarry's second stage of projection – the body is no longer conceived as a series of disconnected parts. Instead, it is perceived in terms of its individual capacities and needs. "There is a current slogan that makes me laugh" muses Pine, "a woman can do anything a man can do, and do it while bleeding. But at the same time as laughing, I'm also wondering – what if I can't?" She then writes about the ups and downs of hormonal changes, including feelings of faintness and the pain of cramps (113). At this point, menstruation is framed in terms of what it can do to a person: how it feels, what it needs and what it brings about. Rhetorical and self-reflective questions such as this appear frequently in Pine's essay. They render her stream of thought while also urging readers to pause and consider those questions themselves. In this second stage of projection, the act of listening to one's body is posited as an essential step in the journey towards self-acceptance, a journey that involves leaving shame behind.

In turning readers' attention to the real effects and pains of menstruation, Pine generates a counter-narrative to the many instances in life where menstruation is tabooed and silenced. The following passage clearly resonates to this effect:

> I have a body that bleeds. Once a month it squelches, wet and hot, with blood. This blood runs out of the side of the pad, it stains the crotch of my jeans, it drips onto the bathroom floor when I forget to replace the tampon. It is inconvenient and messy and necessary and vibrant and drenching and awe-inspiring. And it is *red*. And it is *loud*. And it is *mine* (116; emphasis in the original).

An alternate narrative of menstruation is achieved firstly through openness and honesty; Pine writes about blood in an attempt to normalise conversations about the topic. Secondly, her text offers a very realistic image of what bleeding and menstruation involve. The use of the verbs *squelch, run out, stain,* and *drip* contribute to construct a multisensory image of bleeding. Blood is not simply *there* anymore. It *does* things: it moves, it stains, it makes noise. For this reason, this passage is crucial in its portrayal of motion and flow, which is what menstruation is all about. It is no longer static nor disembodied. Blood is full of movement, it is capable of staining, it has the need to flow.

The last sentences of the passage above are also very revealing, especially with regards to Scarry's third stage of the projection of the body – conceiving the body as "aliveness" or "awareness." Blood is not projected by verbs any longer, it is not represented as what it can *do*. Instead, the author uses adjectives – *inconvenient, necessary, vibrant, red, loud* – to portray a vivid embodiedness of menstruation, both associated with pain and discomfort, but also with strength and vitality. Once more, Pine makes use of the rhetorical devices of anaphora and parallelism. Anaphora infuses her text with a particular rhythm of emphasis, and the italicised words convey a sense of alertness and awareness, as they stand out from the rest of the words and contribute to the overall cadence. Because female menstruation has been and continues to be silenced and associated with shame across the world (Bobel 2020), Pine's words are a shout out to the existence and the presence of women's periods. They project a reaffirmation of the female body and an understanding of menstruation not as something "othered" nor detached, but rather, as something full of vitality, vibrant and part of female existence.

In addition to menstruation, the scar is a very powerful symbol in Pine's narrative. In her book *La Cicatriz en la Literatura Europea,* Iona Gruia (2015) examines the scar and its functions in literature from the perspectives of the political, philosophical and social. Gruia affirms that the scar in literary texts can constitute a mark of identification, which contrary to a person's face, is ineffaceable (9). Scars can also be associated with story-telling and vulnerability (Gruia, 9-11). In 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes,' scars are first mentioned when Pine brings up the act of shaving. The essay examines the pressure women are submitted to with regards to shaving. Because of the societal pressure to fit in and to appear clean and beautified, Pine used to shave off the hair from her armpits, with the consequent aggravation of her eczema and the forming of scars (122). Pine's inability to accept her natural body led her to inflict pain upon herself. Again, vulnerability, shame, and concealment all come together in the self-perception of the body.

Scars appear once more towards the end of the essay, where Pine meditates on what scars meant to her during her childhood. She describes how, as a child, she would reveal her scars to others, detailing what they were and where they came from (128). In this sense, scars took on a narrative quality, as they told a story about the person who carried them. Yet, they did not solely narrate a story of injury or pain. For Pine, they were "badges of honour, external proof of internal daring" (128-129). However, as Pine observes, this meaning shifts as one grows older. Upon leaving childhood behind, this unapologetic frankness and pride stays behind as well, getting lost in self-consciousness and shame. Pine writes:

> It is time to recapture the childhood acceptance of our bodies as a sign of who we are, of what we have done. My body is healthy, it has survived some challenges. It is a body that makes me feel good more than it makes me feel bad. My body enables me to do things.[…] And when I see my lumpectomy scar, a pale white line across my right breast, it makes me happy. *The scar is not a sign of weakness, it is a symbol of how I came to my body.* I need this scar because I need the reminder that I am the owner of this body (129; own emphasis added).

There are several key aspects here that should be commented upon. Firstly, the body for Pine becomes a sign of a person's identity, and she vindicates the need for its acceptance. Once more, the presence of anaphora and parallelism can be observed, used here to accentuate the importance and value of the body. Additionally, the emphasis of the body is directly linked to the scar, which Pine views as a symbol for the whole body – a body that has been silenced, hidden away, repressed, and shamed. Throughout her essay, Pine refers to other elements of the female body that are typically deemed imperfections, such as cellulite or body hair. Thus, when Pine asserts that the scar symbolizes her entire body, it also represents all the parts and alleged imperfections that women are told to hide away. As a symbol for the body, the scar also becomes a symbol of awareness and "aliveness" and as a result, of empowerment: "it is not a sign of weakness" as Pine states. In line with Scarry's third stage of the projection of the body – conceiving of the body as aliveness – the scar, which was initially a source of anxiety, shame, and silence, is transformed into a narrative of power and vitality.

Altogether, 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes' emphasizes the importance of women coming to terms with their bodies. For Pine, overcoming the gendered emotions of shame and humiliation involves giving voice to silenced and taboo topics – those associated with vulnerability that are deemed 'feminine,' embodied and relational. In a modern reinterpretation of Virginia Woolf's "Killing the Angel of the House" (2018), Pine reclaims her body, asserting her writing and scars as symbols of recovery, pride, and aliveness – an act of openness and textual resistance against societal norms that stigmatize the female body and vulnerability and shame that are often attached to it.

4. Writing the Female Body

Up to this point, I have explored the ways in which Pine projects her body into writing to give voice to frequently silenced and shamed topics associated with the female body. In this second section of my analysis, I examine the narrative role of vulnerability and how Pine's style approximates the concept of "women's writing," as coined by French feminist theorists in the 1970s. Broadly speaking,

French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig asserted that Western culture is rooted in the domination and oppression of women. As a result, they proposed the idea of a core "féminité," as a starting point from which to deconstruct patriarchal language and thinking as a whole (Jones 1981, 248). Their ideas have faced criticism by scholars who argue that equating female subjectivity with women's bodily functions and instincts can be essentialist and idealist, suggesting a need to move beyond male-centred and binary constructions altogether (Jones 1981, Moi 2008).

Nevertheless, as I will further explain, "écriture fémenine" can also be interpreted as a metaphorical call for reclaiming a space of difference rather than an endorsement of biological determinism. In *The Newly Born Woman,* Cixous and Clément discuss the "thread or double braid" of the gender binary that weaves through criticism, literature and philosophy (1975, 63). In fact, they explicitly state that "difference is not distributed, of course, on the basis of socially determined 'sexes'" and that "we have to be careful not to lapse smugly or blindly into an essentialist ideological interpretation" (Cixous and Clément, 81). While her views are not without controversy, as I will illustrate, Cixous challenges patriarchal definitions of women and celebrates the potential for women to define themselves in ways that exceed traditional roles and representations. More to the point, her ideas resonate with Pine's essay, particularly their shared appeal for new representations of women's bodies and selfhood to subvert phallocentric discourses.

In her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' Cixous (1976) introduced the concept of "écriture feminine," translated into English as "women's writing." According to Cixous, "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies […]. Woman must put herself into the text" (875). The main problem with these assertions lies in the use of the terms "woman" and "women." Moi (2008) observes that it can be very frustrating for women writers to be told to "write as a woman or like a woman," as this does not have a clear meaning and can easily fall into definitions influenced by stereotypes (266). In fact, in *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler (1990) argued that at the heart of feminism lies the problematic assumption that the concept of "women" refers to an identity which all women have in common (6). Indeed, this assumption is misleading and reductive; however, the dilemma is that, on the other hand, it can also be frustrating for women to be told to write as any other human being, since this second option ignores gender altogether (Moi, 266).

Cixous, however, intentionally refrains from providing a definition of "women's writing." In fact, she does not even pigeonhole a definition of "woman"; on the contrary, she marvels at the richness and the variety that the

term denotes (876). This perspective resonates with Pine's work, as she does not claim to speak for all women or offer fixed definitions of womanhood. Rather, Pine writes from her individual experience as a woman, focusing particularly on the shame and taboos surrounding women's bodies. Pine's writing exemplifies Cixous's call for women to inscribe their realities into texts, weaving personal anecdotes with broader societal observations, channelling her experiences into a form of writing that challenges patriarchal norms.

Although Cixous does not provide a definition of "women's writing," she offers several insights into its characteristics. Firstly, "women's writing" serves as a means to give women a voice, especially in response to a long history of silencing (880). In recent decades in the western world, there have been great advances towards gender equality for women and girls. However, the battle has still not been won. In her interview with Villar-Argáiz (2021), Pine brought up the fact that *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2017), published only recently, hardly included any Irish women poets. As Pine put it, there is still much to do, and "we're not done, we're just not done!" For Pine, it is especially difficult to speak about her problems her pains. "I have stayed silent during a smear test, trying to ignore the pain caused by a badly wielded speculum. I have stayed equally silent, refusing to allow myself to cry out, during an excruciating ultrasound of my womb" writes Pine (2019, 127). While Scarry argues that pain resists language and even destroys it (1985, 4), Pine's essay suggests otherwise. Her essay is about finding a voice – and also a place – to express the pain and the shame she has so often kept silent.

Another crucial aspect of "women's writing," according to Cixous, is the significance of women's bodies. In consonance with Beauvoir's concept of the "othering" of the female body, Cixous emphasises that women have long been alienated from their physical selves (885). As such, she believes that women must write through their bodies: "Your body must be heard" (880). Echoing this idea, Pine asks, "What if my body could tell the story?" (130). In 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes,' she does not merely write *about* her body; she allows her body itself to *write* the story:

> Famously, the trick to good writing is bleeding onto the page. I picture the male writer who coined this phrase, sitting at his typewriter, the blank sheet before him. What kind of blood did he imagine? Blood from a vein in his arm? Or a leg? Perhaps a head wound? Presumably it was not blood from a cervix (Pine, 109).

Pine decides to move beyond shame and voice her story through her own blood. Metaphorically, she bleeds onto her page, pouring out her inner thoughts and

feelings, which adds an additional dimension of physicality and truthfulness to her essay. In this way, menstruation becomes not only her subject matter but also her ink.

In addition, Cixous states that "a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic" (888). It should produce a language that "does not hold back" (889). One of the distinguishing features of Pine's writing is her honesty. She writes about orgasms, cramps, perky breasts, hot flashes, and old blood without restraint (118). Her text is full of visual and realistic instances such as "stuffing bleached cotton into my vagina to stem the flow [...] hoping not to leak on some man's sheets, or rip off too much pubic hair with the extra secure adhesive strips" (109-110). Such graphic descriptions may shock some readers; to others, they might seem crude or excessively personal. Yet this candidness is precisely what Pine seeks to vindicate.

In her writing, Pine unapologetically writes who she is, what she does and how she feels, embodying the act of "openness" that Cixous (19975) and Nussbaum (1986) advocate. This openness represents vulnerability on multiple levels: the embodied vulnerability of a body that hurts, bleeds, cramps, and experiences hot flashes, as well as the sociopolitical vulnerability associated with being categorized as a woman, which includes the shame attached to the body and the pressure to silence and invisibilise it. Pine's text also embodies the vulnerability of writing itself, as Moi accurately points out: "to write is to risk rejection and misunderstanding" (268). In being open, Pine invites relationality and interaction, embracing both the fragility and the potentiality of vulnerability. Through her candidness, she normalizes the discussion of topics that should not remain silenced in the twenty-first century.

Finally, Cixous states that writing gives a woman "access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal" (880). In this sense, the act of writing becomes an act of reconnection between the woman and her body. It is an act of looking within oneself and reaching inwards towards all that has been hidden away. The process of looking within is reflected in Pine's description of looking into a mirror:

> Sometimes it is hard to look in the mirror. Sometimes it takes years – in my case, decades – to look at ourselves fully. Sometimes the most courageous thing is to look at ourselves without mirrors at all. This kind of nakedness takes work. Getting naked, after all, is not just about how we look on the outside, but admitting how we feel on the inside about how we look on the outside (Pine, 129-130).

For Pine, looking into a mirror involves more than simply observing her physical reflection. Nakedness provides her with the opportunity to face and ultimately

accept herself and her body. The page offers a similar chance: she pours her naked, exposed self into her writing, undergoing a journey of self-exploration and recognition.

In this way, and directly in relation to Scarry's third stage of the "projection of the body," writing serves as an act of reclaiming the body. By representing her vulnerabilities, shame, and embodied experiences, Pine engages in a process of acceptance and awareness of her own "aliveness." As I have shown, the textual performance of vulnerability is characterized by embodied experience and honesty; however, it also operates as a trope that fulfils a political purpose. Interestingly, the book is titled *Notes to Self* because it was originally conceived for her own personal use. Pine said that writing her book was "the only way of getting it [her experiences] out of my body and into a different format so I could look at it. I wrote it down and I never intended anybody else to read it" (Villar-Argáiz). Yet, the personal notes and reflections in 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes,' initially meant to remain private, evolved into a published narrative that challenges and fights against deeply rooted patriarchal values. In sharing this book with the world, what was personal became political, illustrating how vulnerability can serve as a form of textual resistance and empowerment. It is not only Pine's story; it is the story of many other women who today are still fighting for an unashamedly feminist world.

5. Conclusions

In recent years, there has been a significant surge of interest in vulnerability, not only as a concept but as a framework that spans multiple fields of study, including philosophy, law, ethics, sociology, gender studies, literary criticism, and psychology. This widespread interest has emerged in response to contemporary social and political climates that emphasize the value of acknowledging interdependence, relationality, and embodied experience (Butler 2016; Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández 2023; Fineman 2008; Gilson 2014). This article has examined how vulnerability is portrayed in Emilie Pine's essay 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes.' Specifically, it has focused on vulnerability from a sociopolitical standpoint, examining the lived, embodied experience of the author in relation to the pressures and expectations regarding the female body. In this way it has been demonstrated that vulnerability is neither static nor a mere susceptibility to harm; rather, the examination of Pine's text has shown vulnerability's elasticity as a dynamic, multifaceted force with a range of meanings and functions. After exploring the representation of the body, in particular the symbolism of menstruation and scars, the representation of how the physical self follows Scarry's (1985) conceptualisation of the "projection of

the body" is discussed. This showcases a clear progression from the conception of the body as fragmented – a collection of isolated parts – to its perception as an integrated whole, full of awareness and vitality. Pine's essay originates from a position of sociopolitical vulnerability; yet it is precisely this vulnerability and the shame historically attached to the female body, that becomes the catalyst for expressing her pain and reclaiming agency.

Through her writing, Pine also contests the patriarchal patterns and silences that permeate contemporary Western society, acquiring a particular style that approximates that of "écriture féminine." In a similar way to "women's writing," Pine's narrative inscribes her bodily experience into her essay, claiming space for visibility and voice. The analysis examines both what Pine's text *means* and what it *does,* paying special attention to the role of vulnerability within "écriture féminine." Writing from her personal experience as a twenty-first-century Irish woman, Pine underscores the importance of openly talking about topics such as menstruation, shame, cellulite, orgasms, pain, and scars, and argues against the cultural imposition of shame and silencing on women. According to Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández, vulnerability can serve as a narrative resource that elicits both aesthetic and ethical demands (5-6). Aesthetically, Pine's essay demands an expression of vulnerability that moves beyond patriarchal figurations, foregrounding the inadequacy of these structures to express the vulnerability associated with the category of "woman." Instead, she shifts focus toward the capabilities of expressing vulnerability in her own terms and draws attention to the role language plays in the process. Her writing is marked by honesty and openness, acknowledging fragility and pain while also emphasizing awareness, vitality, dependency, and relationality. This act of disclosure, which originates from a place of shame, strengthens rather than weakens the author. Thus, 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes' illustrates vulnerability as potential (Gilson 2014), and vindicates women and girls speaking openly, especially regarding their own bodies. As Pine puts it, her essay shows "what it looks like when a woman bleeds onto the page" (Pine, 131). In this way, vulnerability becomes a narrative resource that serves an ethical purpose, not merely recognizing shame but actively processing it (Thorgeirsdottir 2020), reframing vulnerability as a source of awareness and vitality.

Ultimately, Pine's text illustrates the significant role vulnerability plays in shaping contemporary "women's writing" and exemplifies how contemporary "écriture feminine" employs vulnerability and openness around bodily and emotional experiences as narrative and ethical resources. Looking ahead, future research could examine vulnerability within the context of digital narratives, particularly the confessional styles prevalent on platforms like Instagram. This might include exploring the account of Irish feminist writer Sinéad Gleeson (@

sineadgleeson) or extending beyond the Irish cultural framework to incorporate voices such as Rebekah Taussig's account of confessional mini-memoirs (@sittingpretty), where she publicly shares personal stories related to embodied experiences, family, and disability. An analysis of these digital spaces could illuminate how they facilitate contemporary forms of "écriture féminine," representing vulnerability, challenging stigma, and redefining empowerment on women's own terms.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2015. *We Should All Be Feminists*. New York: Anchor Books.

Bauer, Nancy. 2016. "On the Limits of Philosophizing." *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy,* 12 (19): 1-4. https://sgrp.typepad.com/sgrp/spring-2016-symposium-gines-.html

Bobel, Chris et al. 2020. *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7

Brown, Patrick. 2022. *On Vulnerability: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429347740-1

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay, eds. 2016. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham, NC: Duke UP. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11vc78r

Cixous, Hélène and Catherine Clément. 1975. *The Newly Born Woman*. Translated by Sandra M. Gilbert. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cixous, Hélène. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, 1 (4): 875-893. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239. https://doi.org/10.1086/493306

Dawe, Gerald, ed. 2017. *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108333313

De Beauvoir, Simone. 2011. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage.

Dhuibhne, Éilís Ní. 2020. "Notes to Self." *Estudios Irlandeses*, 15: 266-269 https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/reviews/notes-to-self/

Evans, Martina. 2018. "*Notes to Self*: Essays by Emilie Pine – Startling Essays on Addiction, Infertility and Rape." *The Irish Times* (July 21). https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/notes-to-self-essays-by-emilie-pine-startling-essays-on-addiction-infertility-and-rape-1.3566926

Fernández-Santiago, Miriam and Cristina Gámez-Fernández, eds. 2023. *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032130323

Fineman, Martha Albertson. 2008. "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition." *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism,* 20 (1): 1–23.

Gámez-Fernández, Cristina and Miriam Fernández-Santiago, eds. 2024. *Embodied VulnerAbilities in Literature and Film*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003435891

Ganteau, Jean-Michel. 2015. *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315696690

Gilson, Erinn C. 2014. *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700001066

Goodin, Robert E. 1985. *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gruia, Iona. 2015. *La Cicatriz en la Literatura Europea Contemporánea*. Sevilla: Editorial Renacimiento.

Harte, Liam. 2020. "Scar Issues: The Year in Ireland." *Biography*, 43 (1), 94-100. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/764239. https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2020.0015

Houppert, Karen. 1999. *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

Jones, Ann Rosalind. 1981. "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of 'L'Ecriture Feminine.'" *Feminist Studies,* 7 (2): 247-263. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177523

Jordan, Justine. 2019. "*Notes to Self* by Emilie Pine Review - A Life Laid Bare in Essays." *The Guardian* (June 5). https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/05/notes-to-self-emilie-pine-review-essays

Luna, Florencia. 2009. "Elucidating the Concept of Vulnerability: Layers not Labels." *International Journal of Feminist Approached to Bioethics,* 2 (1): 121–139. https://doi.org/10.3138/ijfab.2.1.121

Mackenzie, Catriona, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds, eds. 2014. *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199316649.001.0001

Marso, Lori J. 2012. "Thinking Politically with Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*." *Theory & Event,* 15 (2). https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/478359

Masschelein, Anneleen, Florian Mussgnug and Jennifer Rushworth, eds. 2021. *Mediating Vulnerability: Comparative Approached and Question of Genre*. London: UCL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nnwhjt

Moi, Toril. 2008. "'I am Not a Woman Writer': About Women, Literature and Feminist Theory Today." *Feminist Theory*, 9 (3): 259-271. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108095850

NUSSBAUM, Martha C. 1986. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY. October 2024. "Vulnerable (*adj*.)." *Oxford University Press*. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1136519195

PINE, Emilie. 2019. *Notes to Self.* London: Penguin.

SCARRY, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* New York: Oxford UP.

SHOWALTER, Elaine. 1981. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Critical Inquiry* 8 (2): 179–205. https://doi.org/10.1086/448150

THORGEIRSDOTTIR, Sigridur. 2020. "Shame, Vulnerability and Philosophical Thinking." *Sophia,* 59: 5–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-020-00773-w

VILLAR-ARGÁIZ, Pilar. 2021, February 1. *Irish Writer Emilie Pine in Conversation with Pilar Villar-Argáiz, President of AEDEI* [Interview]. Embassy of Ireland, Madrid. https://www.dfa.ie/livestream/irishwomeninliterature-aconversationwithprofemiliepine/

WOOD, Jill. M. 2020. "(In)Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative." In Chris Bobel et al. 2020, 319-336. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7_25

WOOLF, Virginia 2018. "Professions for Women." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Twentieth Century and After, Volume F*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. 400-404. New York: W.W. Norton.