

The Impediments of Inheritance: Living with the Legacies of Irish History in John  
McGahern's Early Novels

by

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## Abstract

In this thesis I argue that John McGahern's early novels treat the rampant social despondency of mid-twentieth-century Ireland by revealing its roots in the social and political changes of the early twentieth century. I claim that in *The Barracks*, McGahern demonstrates the influence of national(ist) history on life in Ireland in the 1950s and early 1960s by examining his characters' understandings of both Irish emigration and of the Civil War. In my discussion of *The Dark*, I contend that McGahern criticizes the legacies of Irish independence by comparing the nationalist campaign for independence with his protagonist's own frustrated desire for autonomy, and also by depicting his character's difficulty in navigating a social world shaped by the flawed ideology of independence. Ultimately, I argue that the toll the legacies of history take on the lives of McGahern's characters leads to the bleakness of the novels.

## List of Abbreviations Used

*B*            *The Barracks*  
*D*            *The Dark*

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

In his influential and oft-quoted essay, “The Image,” John McGahern states that all art is the “attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not for long or forever, still a world of the imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours . . . allowing us to see and celebrate even the totally intolerable.” (“Image” 7) This essay in which McGahern argues that we are compelled to “create a world” for ourselves even amidst “totally intolerable” circumstances calls to mind the general disposition of the Irish people in the post-war decades, and has powerful resonances for his early work.<sup>1</sup> His claim, in this same essay, that we are forever “rejecting, altering, shaping, straining towards the one image that will never come, the image on which our whole life took its most complete expression once” (7) strongly evokes the widespread scepticism that a genuinely productive future could be born out of the unfavourable conditions of his native Ireland in the mid-twentieth century – conditions not only stemming from, in McGahern’s words, a “world that had stayed closed and certain for so long,” (“Whatever” 132) but also exacerbated by “innately inward-looking [social and cultural] conservatism.” (“Rural” 166) McGahern certainly considered Irish society of the 1950s to be “insular, repressive and sectarian,” (“Solitary” 91) but what is especially interesting about these claims is the way in which they ground the man’s literary ambitions, if not his oeuvre, in such a parochial social space. It is from his experiences in these post-war years that McGahern’s interest in issues of social and

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<sup>1</sup> “The Image” was originally written as a “prologue” to a public reading McGahern gave at the Rockefeller University in 1968. A transcript of this prologue was first reprinted in 1968 in *The Honest Ulsterman*. It has also appeared in 1991, with minor revisions, in a special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* dedicated to McGahern’s work, and also in *L’Œil-de-boeuf: Revue littéraire trimestrielle* in 1996.

cultural inheritance, ambivalence, and transition emerge. And though he claims that “there is no such thing as a “true’ history,” (“History” 12) his early work bespeaks a careful meditation on the influences of history on an Irish “society that never found any true cohesion,” (“Solitary” 91) and, as McCarthy puts it, exemplifies the “socio-historical witnessing that many consider his pre-eminent achievement.” (23)

Despite still being the subject of some contention, historians generally agree that the period in Ireland’s history between the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s was one of complete social stagnancy.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on his youth in the 1950s, writer John Banville, a contemporary of McGahern’s, notes that “the feeling of impotence was endemic.” (25) Life in Ireland in the mid-century was marked by “political isolationism, literary censorship, clericalism, cultural chauvinism and provincialism, sexual prudery . . . [and] large scale emigration.” (Fallon 31) Predictably then, feelings of frustration and disillusionment were widespread. However, what made these feelings all the more pronounced at the time was the fact that the country was still in its infancy as an independent nation. The long struggle for independence had come to a head in the early decades of the twentieth century, and, in 1922, culminated in the establishment of the Irish Free State. For the centuries of British colonialism preceding the formation of this politically autonomous state within Ireland,

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<sup>2</sup> Terence Brown, for instance, describes the 1950s as a period in which Ireland laid “in the stagnant side-streams of history” and endured “a protracted post-revolutionary fatigue.” (*History* 212) Likewise, J.J. Lee argues that in the post-war years, the Irish people began to feel disillusioned by both “the incapacity of bureaucracy to implement the changes it had in mind,” and the government’s difficulty in “actually getting anything done...after two decades of independence.” (276-7) Killeen, too, argues that Ireland’s bureaucratic impotence in addressing the failures of “social and economic self-sufficiency...brought the country to its knees,” (101) while Brian Fallon notes that “the decade does not show up very well” because Irish society was “bogged down in old enmities and outmoded attitudes and values.” (44)

the nationalist rhetoric of Irish republicans from Robert Emmet to Patrick Pearse provided a sense of moral purpose in the midst of the relentless violence, dissent, and death that defined their country. Due to the absence of tangible political and social progress in Ireland, public opinion regarding the campaign for independence ranged from staunch support to outright protest. Nevertheless, as Killeen claims, when independence was finally achieved, the “majority of people in the Free State accepted the treaty settlement, although with varying degrees of enthusiasm.”<sup>3</sup> (95) Yet, even after the establishment of the Free State, questions remained: could national(ist) ideals continue to sustain the Irish in the years of nation building to come? Would the independent Irish state prove worthy of the struggles and sacrifices of history? Or, alternately, would the new Irish state vindicate a brutal history McGahern himself described as “too compromising to speak about,” a legacy of violence “too terrible for words?” (“Christmas” 155)

Literary historian Terence Brown seems suspicious of such claims. He notes that the Free State years were marked by “harsh realities of a kind that might have discouraged the most vigorous of nation-builders.” (*History* 14) The new Irish government had adopted a country with “a stultifying lack of social, cultural, and economic ambition,” (14) and struggled to shape an economically and politically functional state from the potent, though glorified, ideology of national self-sufficiency. In a rather cynical remark, Brown argues that, from the outset, the Irish people were

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<sup>3</sup> The lukewarm reception of the Irish Free State was largely due to the fact that, under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the north-eastern counties in Ulster had the option of opting out of the Free State and retaining their place in the United Kingdom, thereby partitioning the island of Ireland into two independent states: the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. Partition proved an especially contentious issue for nationalist paramilitary groups such as the IRA who felt that it compromised their republican ideals. Once the Treaty was ratified and the Free State established, Ireland’s *de facto* army, the IRA, splintered into pro- and anti-treaty factions ultimately setting off the Irish Civil War.

“disinclined to contemplate any change other than the political change which independence represented.” (18) The backbone of Irish nationalism had always been “to justify its separatist ambitions by highlighting aspects of social and cultural life which could be identified as traditional and uniquely pertaining to the national being.” (214-5) As such, once this independence had been achieved and this “national being” validated, there was ostensibly no reason for the common Irishman to continue to work for his country, for the future of the autonomous nation so many had died to secure, and Ireland’s progress began to slow considerably.

Due in part to these “growing pains,” the Irish Free State was relatively short lived. By 1937, the Irish Government had introduced and passed a new constitution and, by 1949, it had ratified the Republic of Ireland Act. After a quarter century of independence, the country had finally officially become the Republic that Patrick Pearse had proclaimed on the steps of the Dublin GPO on the first day of the Easter Rising. However, Ireland’s social and economic conditions remained largely unchanged. As Patrick Lynch notes, the realities of independence were still “a far cry from the glowing and heart-warming spontaneity of the democratic program . . . so eloquently proposed in the united Dáil Éireann” (292) years earlier. In these post-war years especially, while countries such as Britain and the United States were feeling the effects of an economic boom, Ireland, which had remained neutral during the so-called Emergency, was fundamentally failing to evolve. Due primarily to “crises in the balance of payments [,] . . . fluctuations in the conditions of external trade,” (Brown, *History* 212) and widespread unemployment, Ireland’s economy was at a standstill. As Brown, again, notes, in the 1950s “the fires of economic nationalism and the quest for cultural self-sufficiency were

waning, but as yet they had not been replaced by a coherent set of new values.” (221) The country seemed “to lack the kinds of self-assurance and ideological conviction necessary to meet” (225) these social and economic challenges, and instead of persisting as generations of Irishmen and women before them, of persevering through the slow transition to a potentially rewarding future, a significant portion of the Irish population “jumped ship,” as it were, and headed for larger, more economically stable countries like England and the United States. In fact, in the mid-twentieth century, emigration had made the Irish the largest non-Briton group in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> Beyond Éire’s shores was a modern world full of opportunity, and there was no reason why struggling Irish men and women felt they should remain on the island especially out of some misguided sense of national responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

Though thousands left Ireland in the mid-century, those who remained were forced to suffer through the difficult and protracted transition from a past, colonial Ireland to a modern, independent one.<sup>6</sup> Unlike North America, Britain, and Western Europe,

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term “non-Briton,” while fully recognizing it as a fraught designation: I recognize that Ireland had been part of the Union since 1800 over which time many Irish emigrants (then, Britons) made their way to Britain, and also recognize that other countries in the Union have their own distinctive demonyms. Essentially, I use the term to differentiate between the Irish who were, after 1922, no longer part of the Union, and those other countries still part of the United Kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the prevalence of emigration to the United Kingdom specifically, Enda Delaney notes that in Irish society “a degree of unease existed . . . about the migration of Irish workers to Britain.” (123) The paradox of Irish migration to the UK was that, in Delaney’s words, it was “an outlet for the reduction of potential social unrest” (123) even though it “was undesirable since it was damaging to national morale.” (124)

<sup>6</sup> By “modern” here, I do not mean “modernized” – Ireland had been a fully industrialized country since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, I use “modern” here to denote an increasingly urban, capitalist, liberal-minded, and even secular reality; all characteristics much of the rest of the Western world had adopted. Certainly the 1950s in Ireland saw some of these “modern” realities take hold. For instance, there was a considerable move away from rural areas and towards urban centres like Dublin. Likewise, though the Church retained

Ireland in the 1950s was still very much a backward-looking, hyper-conservative country. Furthermore, nationalist ideology had placed national subjects in a sort of paradoxical bind between the past and the future. That is, though it was becoming increasingly evident that the country needed to dispense with “the protection of native values and traditions” if they were to succeed in making social and economic policy “the new national imperative,” (Brown, *History* 214) it was, for all intents and purposes, from these very values and traditions that a pure and self-sufficient Ireland was made possible in the first place. In other words, despite wanting to facilitate the transition from old to new, the Irish government found it difficult to circumvent the strongly Catholic, rural, and conservative values that were preventing the nation from embracing this modernity as it was these categories that had bolstered the nationalist movement and ostensibly led to the state’s establishment.<sup>7</sup> The Church, for instance, retained a tremendous amount of

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an enormous amount of influence in public life – McGahern himself has written that even “against the whole spirit of the 1916 Proclamation” his mid-century Irish state “had become a theocracy in all but name” (“Whatever” 128) – Brown notes that, beginning in the late 1950s, “it was recognized that the social and economic changes afoot in the country would present great challenges to the faith of the people and the Church herself.” (294)

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson has explored the relationship between the “old” and the “new” in a national context. He argues that when using “new” to describe the condition of a country – whether that be in the country’s official name or simply in everyday discussions of its characteristics – one necessarily invokes “the meaning of ‘successor to’ or ‘inheritor of something vanished.’” (187) He suggests that in the majority of cases, the designations of “new” and “old” are “aligned diachronically, and the former appears always to invoke an ambiguous blessing from the dead.” (187) The “new” becomes, he claims, “an inheritance, and as an inheritance, [is] compelled to enter a genealogical series.” (196) Interestingly, however, Anderson also argues that in a postcolonial context, “new” and “old” can be “understood synchronically, coexisting within homogeneous empty time.” (187) He describes “new” and “old” in this latter case as “an idiom of sibling competition rather than inheritance.” (187) This is an important distinction especially in the case of mid-century Ireland as it points to the underlying tension between the different possible “shapes” a “new” Ireland might take. That is, though, as I am arguing, the Irish recognized the need to transition from old to new, it remained unclear which version of

authority in the mid-century – dictating, for instance, the outcomes of national elections, and, as J.J. Lee notes, providing one of the “few opportunities for occupational mobility.” (80) Similarly, censorship flourished during this time, even, as I will discuss later, affecting McGahern. In the simplest of terms, Ireland (understandably) struggled to relinquish its traditions even though these traditions tended to impede the very modernity the country needed to embrace if it was to prosper as an independent state.

Just as Irish society was attempting (albeit, failing) to renovate itself, Irish literature of the mid-century was also in a moment of transition. Working in the immense shadows of Yeats and Joyce, Irish writers of the Republic in the late ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s were, as Derek Hand notes, “faced with the problem of renegotiating [their] relationship to their material” and “imagining a new role for themselves in the New Ireland.” (191) The issue of transition, though, was not simply one of formal or thematic evolution. Instead, writers were forced to re-evaluate the position of literature in a seemingly stillborn nation. One of the first dramatic shifts in the qualities of distinctly Irish writing was the abandonment both of national myths and of republican advocacy – features that had characterized earlier Irish writing by groups including the Literary Revival. Reflecting on his place in this Irish (and European) literary tradition, McGahern himself, according to Denis Sampson, conceded that he “was inevitably Irish . . . but to belabour the point or to adopt a self-conscious agenda of furthering some nationalist political or cultural agenda was anathema to him.” (*Young* 45) That is not to say that McGahern or other writers did not recognize the “real gap between ‘official’ Ireland . . . [and] Ireland on the ground.” (Hand 190) They did. However, instead of grappling with this “gap” by

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“newness” they were to embrace, or, more specifically, what sort of relationship to the “old” Ireland they wished to maintain.

promoting Irish solidarity and encouraging optimism and resolve in the face of Ireland's social stasis, Irish writers such as Thomas Kilroy, Aidan Higgins, and, of course, McGahern began to look back on their country's recent history in an attempt to ascertain if and how the great changes that had occurred in Ireland earlier in the century resulted in these static conditions.

The early works of John McGahern reflect the precariousness of Ireland's social circumstances, but shed light on the influence of the country's recent past in shaping these conditions. Certainly, the struggles of McGahern's characters are, as Denis Sampson claims, both "grounded in the material given to him by his own experience" of these bleak social conditions, and concerned with "the redemption of the personal life" (*Young* 58) amidst these circumstances. But, as Terence Brown notes, "what happens to [McGahern's] various characters is governed not only by the weather of feeling but by the social climate as it is affected by historical change." (*Literature* 226) Both *The Barracks* and *The Dark*, published in 1963 and 1965 respectively, present a particularly bleak view of Irish life. In these works, McGahern tackles such weighty subjects as loneliness, poverty, abuse, and the nature of life and death, but does so, in Brown's words, "in socio-historical terms, [treating them] as the product of post-revolutionary despair." (227)

Critics have long argued that McGahern's early novels provide a reflection on the personal struggles of Irish life in the middle decades of the last century. They have described his works as "meditations on the currents of familial and communal life, on the domestic history of the revolutionary decades of Catholic Ireland in the midcentury," (Sampson, *Outstaring* 3) and have noted that the "intimate connection between place and style" (4) is a hallmark of the Irishman's writing. However, critics generally agree that the

“national” dimension of the “intimate connection” between the Irish social landscape and his subject is always secondary in McGahern’s work. As critic F.C. Molloy suggests, McGahern is far more interested in the “conflict between one central character and the social environment” (5) in which he or she lives. And while I agree that McGahern’s early novels certainly provide both a reflection on the struggles of Irish life in the middle decades of the last century and a critique of the socio-political forces regulating this mid-century Irish existence, I would argue that, when considered together, these novels reveal the overwhelming burden of the “inheritance” of national history on Irish subjects – that is, the responsibility to take up the reins of national duty and to continue to revitalize and improve Ireland’s social conditions. In other words, though I think critics are right to note that the “tragedy” of McGahern’s novels stems from their respective characters’ “sense of social and cultural isolation . . . of not belonging to any social world,” (Whyte 21) I am arguing that McGahern’s portrayal of loneliness and helplessness evokes more than simply the characters’ disenchantment with Ireland’s contemporary social and ideological institutions. I would contend instead that McGahern’s characters’ sense of isolation and helplessness in these early novels stems directly from their experiences of the legacies of Ireland’s national history as well as their inability to live up to these legacies by effecting the transition from old Ireland to new – by continuing to innovate and shape the new Irish nation.

In what follows, I show how McGahern’s early novels treat the social despondency of his mid-century Ireland by examining its roots in the socio-political changes of the early twentieth century. I focus on the ways in which the characters of *The Barracks* and *The Dark* conceive of their place not simply as inheritors of a new Ireland,

but as the generation tasked with effecting the socio-cultural transition between the old Ireland and the new. Not only do the political, cultural, social, and religious institutions of the old Ireland influence the characters' lives in their "modern" social situations, the changes these institutions have effected circumscribe the characters' daily lives and reveal the lasting legacies of national(ist) history in this modern Ireland. In my examination of *The Barracks*, I argue that the dissatisfaction both Elizabeth and Reegan feel about their lives stems from their understanding of the failures of their own respective contributions to the development of the independent Ireland in which they live. I claim that in *The Barracks*, McGahern grapples with the legacies of both Irish emigration and of the Irish Civil War in an attempt to demonstrate the degree to which, in Ireland, individual experience is coloured by national history. In the third chapter on *The Dark*, I contend that McGahern criticizes the legacies of Irish independence by both drawing parallels between the outcome of the nationalist campaign for independence and Mahoney's own frustrated desire for autonomy, and also by depicting the boy's inability to navigate a world shaped by the flawed ideology of Irish independence. I argue that the inextricability of personal experience and national history proves both debilitating and fundamentally demoralizing for Mahoney, just as it does for Elizabeth and Reegan. Finally, I conclude that the toll the legacies of Irish national history take on these characters' lives not only leads to the bleakness of McGahern's early novels, but also allows the writer to explore the nuances of the mid-century Irish disillusionment.

**Chapter 2 “The fault in the strip of the green and gold with the white between”:  
Disappointment, Disillusionment, and the Reegans’ Irish Failures in *The Barracks***

Upon its release in 1963, John McGahern’s *The Barracks* was met with immediate critical acclaim. An extract from the forthcoming novel had already nabbed the Clontarf schoolteacher the Arts Council of Ireland’s AE Memorial Award a year earlier, and, following the novel’s publication, McGahern was awarded the Macauley Fellowship allowing him to take time off from teaching to write his next novel. Renowned writers and critics lauded the novel; Anthony Burgess, for instance, wrote that no one had yet “caught so well the peculiar hopelessness of contemporary Ireland.” (qtd. in *Outstaring* 34) That *The Barracks* received numerous accolades and such widespread acclaim remains unsurprising to Denis Sampson who argues that the appearance of the earlier extracts in literary publications such as *The Dolmen Miscellany* indicated that “the young writer was already the peer of the established writers of his generation.” (*Outstaring* 33) From *The Barracks*’ opening scene, it becomes immediately apparent why McGahern’s first novel garnered such ubiquitous critical admiration. This incisive account concerning an evening in the titular police barracks in the Irish countryside clearly demonstrates the depth of McGahern’s understanding of the mood and atmosphere in Ireland in the mid-century.<sup>8</sup> As F.C. Molloy suggests, *The Barracks* illustrates the degree to which McGahern recognized the underlying ambivalence of the Irish people towards their social situation. Molloy claims that, in *The Barracks*, McGahern attempts to explain “how and why [the Irish] are at a variance with their society,” (5) though I would add that

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<sup>8</sup> All previously published excerpts of *The Barracks* were taken from the novel’s first chapter. The chapter as whole, published in *The Dolmen Miscellany of Irish Writing* as “A Barrack Evening,” is the piece that earned McGahern the AE Memorial Award.

McGahern succeeds in locating this tension or “variance” in the realm of (Irish) history. Similarly, Grace Tighe Ledwidge argues that McGahern had his finger on the pulse of post-war Ireland, and claims that this insight is obviously reflected in his first novel. I agree with Ledwidge’s claim that “Elizabeth Reegan’s tragedy unfolds in the bleak, postcolonial world of mid-twentieth-century rural Ireland” (90) and that it demonstrates the human “instinct to go on passively with what life is in present circumstances,” (91) but would suggest, furthermore, that McGahern portrays his characters’ “passivity” as a response to their encounters with issues of national history.<sup>9</sup>

It would be overly simplistic to assume that the young McGahern’s ability in both tapping into and depicting the Irish people’s underlying ambivalence towards their society came simply from observing those around him. McGahern’s astuteness in portraying both the discouraged sensibilities of the Irish people and the existential struggles all people face stemmed largely from his own personal experiences growing up in Ireland. As Sampson has convincingly argued, *The Barracks* emerges first out of McGahern’s childhood experiences in County Leitrim, and secondly from his early adulthood in Dublin. In the preface to his quasi-biographical account of McGahern’s formative years as a writer, Sampson claims that in the man’s earliest novel one easily finds “the anguished voice that searched relentlessly for meaning and calm in bewildering personal circumstances.” (*Young* vii) And though McGahern has always adamantly held that “his fiction was not autobiographical,” (ix) his novels draw heavily on events and experiences taken from his own life as well as from his homeland’s history. It is

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<sup>9</sup> R. F. Foster offers a similar perspective, arguing that “even in the work of apparent traditionalists such as John McGahern . . . past Irish politics play a subtle but unmistakable part both in the destinies and psychologies of [his] protagonists.” (170)

unsurprising, for example, that his first novel explores the premature death of a mother as McGahern's own mother had succumbed to breast cancer when he was only ten years old.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, beyond simply allowing McGahern to “cope with his grief . . . by imagining the scene, by participating in it,” (*Young* 14) engaging with both literal and figurative forms of death facilitated his attempt to express and define a larger sense of what it means to live amidst the “predictable forces of nature and culture: time passing, human instincts, [and] the imprints of history,” (15) and thus comment on the condition of his native Ireland. In other words, though writing *The Barracks* enabled McGahern to deal with personal struggles including the loss of his own mother, this first novel also enabled him to explore the psyche of his parochial, post-war Ireland – a national psyche itself shaped by the historical imperative to return to a symbolic Irish mother, the figure of the *Sean-Bhean Bhocht*, or Kathleen Ni Houlihan who “summons her children to her flag.” (“Proclamation” 245)

The depth of McGahern's comprehension of the nature of Ireland's social and cultural condition in the 1950s can be attributed, as Sampson has stated, to the fact that “this acute observer and recorder of his own intimate experience growing up became an equally acute observer of the reality in which he found himself.” (*Young* 42) In the early 1950s, the budding writer had left his rural home, and moved to Dublin where he found, for the first time, a place “in which literature really mattered . . . in the general cultural discourse of national self-consciousness.” (43) McGahern “welcomed the opportunities

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<sup>10</sup> The trope of the dying or deceased mother appears throughout McGahern's oeuvre, and is especially important in his novels *The Dark* (1965), *The Leavetaking* (1975), and *Amongst Women* (1990). Denis Sampson argues that, having lost her at such a young age, “McGahern's recreation of his lost mother became a private ritual in the years following her death . . . [and] gave him his earliest material for fiction.” (*Young* 14)

for immersion into city life,” and his “urban experiences” directly contributed to the “sensibility that [would] later be made concrete in words.” (42)

In the Irish capital he read voraciously and met such important figures as Patrick Kavanagh, and, despite not actually writing with any proficiency until near the end of the decade, often thought about how the literary oeuvres of contemporary Irish writers might fit within their country’s stilted social context.<sup>11</sup> Sampson argues that amid the feelings of widespread social uncertainty and dejectedness in Dublin – feelings exacerbated by the massive influx of rural Irish migrants leaving their farms in an (often failed) attempt to find work in the city during the period’s economic depression – McGahern was scoping out (and, I would argue, found) a place for his own future writing. The combination of Ireland’s social circumstances and the ideas being proliferated in Dublin’s literary circles helped McGahern shape his own ideas about literature, especially its ability to create “a sense of stability and balance in the midst of ‘chaos’, perhaps even to penetrate the nationalist history of revolutions in order to see Irish country life.” (*Young* 79)

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<sup>11</sup> Sampson notes that, upon arriving in Dublin, McGahern “consider[ed] . . . the real value of literary coteries for his life’s work.” (*Young* 48) Despite his reputation for being “difficult,” Patrick Kavanagh in particular proved to be an especially strong influence on the young McGahern. The poet and his work obviously helped shape McGahern’s “sincere and deep feeling for his own small world,” (50) and, as Sampson again suggests, was even obliquely commemorated in McGahern’s short story “Parachutes” (50). Patrick Kavanagh’s notions of “the parish” and the “parochial imagination” proved especially appealing to the young McGahern. The young writer seemed convinced by Kavanagh’s notions that engaging with the “parish compels us to address how we think about the local,” and felt, like his predecessor, that “a preoccupation with the parochial can be intellectually and culturally fruitful.” (Tomaney 323) Unsurprisingly, McGahern would later adopt the (aptly named) “peasant poet’s” ideas in his own work, and show, like Kavanagh, an “ongoing concern with the relationship between parish and universe, local and global.” (313)

The driving force behind McGahern's entire oeuvre is that "the universal is the local, but with the walls taken away." ("Local" 11) For McGahern, the task of the writer is to fully explore and properly communicate the shared human experience of living, while using specific settings, narrow timeframes, and particular individuals. In the Irishman's eyes, an adept writer has the ability to turn "one room or town or locality . . . into an everywhere." (11)<sup>12</sup> In *The Barracks* specifically, the local/universal paradigm has strong national undercurrents. As I will show, McGahern uses important moments of Irish history in the novel to examine the relationship between individuals and their larger national communities. The personal lives of his two main characters, Elizabeth and Reegan, are inevitably tethered to a larger national history. Likewise, McGahern's depiction of Elizabeth and Reegan's struggles to come to terms with their personal roles in the (recent) history of Ireland imparts his idea that this struggle with the past is potentially definitive of Ireland's broader social and cultural moment. The isolation and disappointment these characters feel when they confront the past are for McGahern "national" truths shared by all Irish people. He claims, after all, that "out of the particular we come on what is general," and that this generality "we call truth, and . . . truth has to

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<sup>12</sup> Despite not meeting him in Dublin, McGahern was tremendously influenced by Samuel Beckett. In the mid-1950s, for instance, McGahern attended Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which was being performed in Dublin for the first time. Later in the decade, when Beckett's post-war work had been translated into English, McGahern "devoted the intense kind of reading to the work" and, like Kavanagh, the Irish expatriate "assumed a certain emblematic presence in McGahern's reading of the Irish and European literary landscape." (Sampson *Young* 53) In the same way that McGahern's concern for the "local" seems to recall Kavanagh's emphasis on the "parish," the value he ascribes to the writer's ability in utilizing "each word with its own weight, colour, shape, relationship" to extend "out into a world without end," ("Solitary" 92) echoes Beckett's insistence on indeterminacy and ambiguity in terms of temporal and spatial settings, as well as character and plot. Overall, I would argue that, with regard to the Irish literary tradition, McGahern's writing is informed primarily (and equally) by Kavanagh and Beckett, and that the aforementioned "local/universal" force underpinning McGahern's oeuvre is in fact a synthesis of these writers' respective literary aesthetics.

be continually renewed.” (“Local” 11) As such, despite emphasizing the seemingly subjective personal experiences of Elizabeth and Reegan, McGahern is able in *The Barracks* to express his insight into the condition of a broader Irish experience in the mid-twentieth century.

*The Barracks* chronicles Elizabeth Reegan’s final year or so living in the remote police barracks run by her husband, Reegan, in the Irish countryside. The novel explores the disillusionment, bitterness, and futility both she and Reegan feel in their daily lives. For Elizabeth, feelings of boredom and alienation have defined life in the Ireland of her birth, a country to which she has returned after many years in London. In the novel, these feelings are exacerbated by her realization that the lumps she has recently discovered in her breasts will likely kill her. She is plagued by the thought that she will die in middle-age, and, more importantly, die in these secluded barracks neither having fulfilled the ambition she had always imagined she possessed, nor attained the life she had once hoped for. Elizabeth’s inner turmoil is, again, what makes *The Barracks* such a success according to Eamon Maher who claims that “reading the novel is cathartic in the sense that we experience the tragedy at the end of Elizabeth’s life but are not obliged to undergo firsthand the awful reality her death represents for her.” (*Local* 14) Moreover, *The Barracks* depicts Reegan’s perpetual disenchantment with his position as a sergeant in the Garda Síochána. Throughout the novel, Reegan struggles to reconcile his position in Ireland’s police force with his past as an Irish Republican militant, and, more importantly, to come to terms with the incompatibility of the independent Ireland he had fought for as a younger man, and the country that violent Irish nationalism actually birthed.

In this section, I will demonstrate how, in *The Barracks*, Elizabeth and Reegan's personal lives are indelibly marked by their participation (or lack thereof) in shaping their independent Irish nation. I will first argue that one of the key sources of Elizabeth's isolation and hopelessness in the novel consists of her time working in London, including during the Blitz. I will show that Elizabeth's inability to find meaning in her present circumstances, and especially to connect with those around her, emerges largely from how she perceives her migration to Britain: that is, as an impediment to her active involvement in the development of the post-independence Irish nation. I will also argue that, in a similar way, Reegan's isolation and dissatisfaction with his life in the barracks results from the disparity he sees between the country he fought for during his days as a militant nationalist, and the country he served during the Irish Civil War and continues to serve as a sergeant in the Civic Guard. I will suggest, overall, that both Elizabeth and Reegan's ambivalence and general discontentment with life in the barracks is born out of their distinct experiences of and involvement in Irish nationalism, and reflect McGahern's notion that the individual and the national are inseparable and that this inseparability is as much a cause of Ireland's mid-century despondency as the country's social conditions.

From the novel's outset, McGahern displays Elizabeth's strong sense of isolation and helplessness. She feels at odds with her husband and his children as well as the other families residing in the barracks. However, Elizabeth's feelings of alienation from those around her does not stem from any sort of animosity between them. Though she is unsure if her children, for instance, love her, she knows that, at the very least, they "did not hate her." (B 8) Likewise, everyone in the barracks including the Reegans' neighbours show genuine concern for Elizabeth when she falls ill and must be hospitalized. Overall,

Elizabeth's relationships with others are ostensibly normal, if occasionally a bit awkward. Though there are certainly many possible causes prompting Elizabeth's sense of isolation from those around her, her twenty years working as a nurse in England – including during the Second World War – seem to be a major factor influencing her interaction with others, and, in turn, provoking the dissatisfaction and anxiety she feels regarding her life in the Irish countryside.

Though she first mentions her time in London while describing a holiday spent in Ireland “after nursing through the Blitz,” (*B* 13) it is during her doctor's appointment, approximately midway through the novel, that Elizabeth reveals the significance of her time in London to her life back in Ireland. While meeting with Dr. Ryan, Elizabeth shows an acute awareness of the medical profession, noticing, for instance, that Dr. Ryan's voice and demeanour is born out of “a world of professional kindness and availability.” (81) More importantly, Elizabeth's two decades working in an English hospital make her privy to the “common pattern” (82) of the Irish doctor's career even before he describes it for her. She knows that he most likely spent “a few years [in England] to gather enough money to start his own practice at home,” and that his reasons for returning to Ireland include the fact that England “was no place to bring up children, you never belonged, you were always Irish.” (82-3) And though this “slight identification brought the two closer together” (83) – each implicitly acknowledges the alienation they felt as Irish individuals in England, and still feel having returned from the modern metropolis to rural Ireland – it is, nevertheless, Elizabeth's experience of having lived and worked in London that sets her apart from the rest of the barrack residents.

In *The Barracks*, Elizabeth never clarifies when exactly she left for England, but, considering her claim to have worked during the Blitz, it seems most likely that she is one of the large number of men and women who left Ireland in the early 1940s to take advantage of Britain's wartime needs. However, regardless of its exact timing, Elizabeth's time in Britain puts her in a position at odds in several ways with her countrymen, and, I would argue, leads to her sense of alienation from the others living in the barracks – Elizabeth knows, for instance, that her “years in London gave her position in [the other officer's wives'] eyes.” (B 50) As I will show, her ambivalence about having worked in London as an Irish woman is two-fold. On the one hand, she understands that she has failed in her duty as an Irish woman because, by going to England, she has deviated from the notion of Irish womanhood – a notion so important to Irish society, it is addressed in the Constitution of Ireland. Secondly, Elizabeth's past working in London bothers her, especially after she marries Reegan, because of its (anti-)national implications. That is, as wife to a former militant nationalist and an authority in the Irish state, Elizabeth is forced to recognize the irony of having gone to London to work for the colonial power that so many men including her husband fought to expel, and, as such, for not having done her part for her country.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Barracks*, Elizabeth understands that the distance she feels between her and Reegan can be attributed in part to her time in London. Unlike his relationship with his first wife – a woman Reegan met at “the Show Dance in Sligo” (B 99) and with whom he is, by all accounts, very close – Reegan's relationship with Elizabeth is, from the outset, rather shaky, and McGahern implies that this instability or uncertainty is due partly to the fact that when Reegan met Elizabeth, she had been living in London for two decades. Elizabeth's experiences in Britain are indirectly blamed for Reegan's inability to fully connect with her, at least in the same way as with his first “Sligo” wife. Elizabeth has had many experiences outside of Ireland, and because of this, Reegan has “never [gotten] close enough to be able to predict her.” (99)

In the first place, by going to London to work – an unremarkable fact in-and-of-itself – Elizabeth forgoes the domestic duty “assigned” her by the Irish Government in the 1937 Constitution of Ireland. As Mary Muldowney notes, before the War the Irish “government’s attitude to women working outside the home . . . firmly stressed the role of women as the nation’s homemakers and child-bearers.” (57) Articles 41.1 and 41.2 of the 1937 version of the *Constitution of Ireland* describe the Irish family as “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights” and that “by her life within the home, [the Irish] woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.” (Article 41.1) As such, in accordance with the Irish Constitution, Irish women “shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to their neglect of their duties in the home.” (Article 41.2) Despite some proto-feminist objection to the government’s attempts to “suffocate the women in the Green flag,” according to J.J. Lee, this “image of women was cherished in Ireland, not least by women themselves.” (207) Even after the War broke out, Irish women in Elizabeth’s position were encouraged, if not expected to remain home and bear children. However, by and large, women in Ireland embraced this domestic role as they felt it part of their national duty.

In *The Barracks*, this expectation causes Elizabeth a tremendous amount of anxiety and regret. By leaving for England to work as a nurse, Elizabeth has forgone “[her] natural function” (Muldowney 58) as well as her “national” one, and this conflation of the woman’s natural and national responsibilities is one of the key sources of Elizabeth’s unhappiness that McGahern presents. The fact that Elizabeth remained in Britain for two decades, in effect spending her childbearing years working as an

unmarried nurse in London, essentially prevents her from taking up this important “Irish” function when she returns to her homeland. In other words, by going to London and giving up her “responsibility” to be a mother, Elizabeth, McGahern shows, has also implicitly gives up her responsibility as an Irish woman. After marrying Reegan, she adopts his children, but the family is never actually hers. Even after returning to Ireland “in her late thirties” Elizabeth has “yet [to] have a child of her own,” (B 8) and this childlessness is a prominent source of her unhappiness in the novel as it triggers her already strong sense of purposelessness.<sup>14</sup> In the first scene, for instance, as evening descends upon the Reegans’ barrack household and Elizabeth and the children await the arrival of the sergeant father, the narrator reveals the emotional distance between Elizabeth and those ostensibly under her care and protection. Despite having initially “hoped when she first came into the house that they would look up to her as a second mother,” Elizabeth believes that “she was nothing to these children;” (8) she has taken the place of their mother, but has not been able to prove herself worthy of their love. For example, she is fully cognizant that Willie, the oldest child, “never trusted her, he’d never even confide his smallest dream in her.”(10) Again, due to her time in London and its direct impact on her inability to have a child of her own, Elizabeth is compelled to try to connect with Willie and his sisters. However, her inability to do so further exacerbates Elizabeth’s overwhelming sense of loneliness and uselessness in the barracks, and, by extension, in Ireland. Elizabeth recognizes that she is there only to make them their lunch

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<sup>14</sup> In the novel, Elizabeth’s feelings of uselessness are born out of her relationship with Michael Halliday. When Halliday, whom she claims to love, abruptly ends their relationship after confessing that he can “do or feel nothing” and that “not even [Elizabeth] had any meaning,” (90) Elizabeth is left wondering whether “she could live her life through in its mystery, without any purpose.” (94)

during the mid-day break from school; she plays no genuine part in their lives, and thus is unable to take up her national role as mother.

By the same token, Elizabeth feels guilty for not taking pride in her domestic duties in the barracks. She recognizes her responsibility as an Irish woman to care for the home and the family, but constantly feels guilty for feeling that these domestic duties, her national responsibilities, give her life very little meaning. In fulfilling the woman's role designated by Irish society, Elizabeth feels she is living "a life . . . that was losing the last vestiges of its purpose and meaning." (49) She claims that "when she first married Reegan she'd found the small world absorbing and beautiful: but it was no longer so." (51) However, it is her time in Britain that is at the root of her disillusionment with the domestic expectations put on her as an Irish woman. By leaving Ireland, Elizabeth delayed her proper integration as a woman in Irish society. Now, though, while attempting to comply with Ireland's social expectations for women, Elizabeth remains unsatisfied with her life, and so feels all the more guilty for not actually being able to take up this "Irish" role. She claims, for instance, that "she'd more than enough of London . . . no desire left for anything there," but that the "small acts of love" (49) and "this world on which she'd used every charm to get accepted" (51) are inadequate in restoring the sense of Irishness she feels she gave up by going to England. She knows that though "she'd escaped out of London, she'd not escape out of . . . the desperation she'd experienced on her own coming back" (51) – a desperation rooted in the purposelessness she feels an inherent part of women's role in Irish society, and laid bare by her experiences having occupied, as a woman, a fairly meaningful social position in London.

Elizabeth's sense of estrangement from her family and of dissatisfaction with her life, however, are not the only consequences of her time in London. In fact, her sojourn in Britain also has significant political implications that equally influence her feelings of alienation and helplessness in the barracks. In addition to her notion that working in London has prevented her, in a sense, from fulfilling her national duty as a woman, her past migration to Britain also provokes her feeling that not only has she not done her part in the development of autonomous Ireland, but she has also, in some way, retreated to the colonial power from which Ireland struggled to achieve its independence. As mentioned in chapter 1, despite detecting the pragmatic need for the Irish to migrate to Britain to obtain work, the Irish ethos regarding migration to Britain retained a rather nationalistic tone. Terence Brown suggests that, after independence and even during the war, "the dominant ideology in the country was . . . in favour of achieving and maintaining as much self-sufficient Irish independence as was possible" because Ireland "had finally thrown off the thrall of foreign subjugation and [so] her true destiny lay in cultivating her national distinctiveness as assiduously as possible." (*History* 146) For Elizabeth then, the stigma is not in *going* to Britain, but instead in *leaving* Ireland.

This tension between needing to go to Britain to work and the responsibility to cultivate Ireland's own "distinctiveness" prompts much of Elizabeth's unhappiness in *The Barracks*. However, unlike the personal guilt she feels for having given up her "Irish" role as homemaker and mother, her ambivalence about having spent twenty years working in London emerges largely from her recognition of the national "service" of the others in the barracks. Unlike Reegan or any of the other officers in the barracks, for instance, Elizabeth has ostensibly done nothing to serve her country. Even the officers'

wives have played their part in developing Ireland's newly won independence. In recalling the early days after marrying Reegan, for instance, Elizabeth remembers the parish priest "approach[ing] her to join the local branch of the Legion of Mary . . . the most extraordinary and powerful organization under the sun . . . founded by one of our own countrymen, Frank Duff." (163) The priest's assumption that Elizabeth will join the organization reflects the period's reinvigorated emphasis on the Catholic Church. The priest feels that the rapid change that has taken place in Ireland requires those "in this humble parish of ours [to] do our bit." (163) However, at the time of this request, Elizabeth adamantly refuses to join the organization though "all the other policemen's wives are joined." (163) Her refusal to yield to the priest's coaxing suggests her initial dismissal of the social significance of serving the new Irish nation.<sup>15</sup> However, as she nears death, and fully recognizes her isolation from those around her, it becomes apparent to Elizabeth that one of the reasons for this separation is her ostensible lack of dedication to Ireland. Elizabeth's "long years in London" have made the Ireland of her birth "an enclosed place," (59) and instead of returning to a independent country that now belongs to her, a country that she has served and a nation to which she has contributed, Elizabeth remains on the outside looking in, as it were; not a mother to (or in) Ireland, but an unnecessary stepmother. During her "enriched and indestructible days" (86) in London where the English nurses addressed her in "a tone that it's a miracle [she] seem[s] civilized," (86) her husband, the other officers, and their wives had all continued to do their part – no matter how small – for their country. This national service, Elizabeth

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<sup>15</sup> By resisting the priest's request, Elizabeth also implicitly refuses to accede to, what Susan Cannon Harris calls, the "sacrificial paradigm" of Irish femininity in the twentieth century in which suffering women such as the *Sean-Bhean Bhocht* and the Virgin Mary are "the only culturally acceptable role models available" (4) to women.

believes, unites the residents of the barracks as compatriots. By the same token though, Elizabeth's failure to serve essentially precludes her entry into their community.

Despite other potential reasons for Elizabeth's unhappiness in *The Barracks* – her failed relationship with Michael Halliday, for example, and, of course, her immanent death from breast cancer – it seems that her time in London has considerably shaped her life in Ireland, and gives rise to her feelings of alienation and helplessness and her fraught relationships with the others. This move to London has prevented her from living as a truly national subject, and has hampered her ability to identify with those in the barracks who have never emigrated from Ireland. She might very well be Irish, but nevertheless feels that due to her considerable time in London, the world in which she finds herself does not belong to her in the same way she believes it belongs to the others. However, as McGahern points out in his novel, the disillusionment and isolation that Elizabeth feels in Ireland is also shared by characters who, unlike her, have served their country and struggled to shape it. Elizabeth's husband, Reegan, would be one such example. In the novel, Reegan functions as a counterpoint to Elizabeth: unlike Elizabeth who feels like an outsider in Ireland because of her absence, Reegan's sense of disillusionment and despondency in the barracks are products of his complete dedication to his country and his experiences during the Irish Civil War.

Like his second wife, Reegan is, from the outset, clearly dissatisfied with his life in the barracks. Early in the novel, for instance, he arrives home on a rainy evening complaining about a tense run-in with his superior, the superintendent Quirke – a common occurrence in the barracks, and one that always irritates the sergeant. After returning home from a day of work, Reegan wants “nothing but to be left alone” (19) and

to “go his own way, [to] heed no one.” (13) The encounter with Quirke, however, does not simply anger Reegan; it also creates a distance between him and his wife. To Elizabeth’s dismay, Reegan “seemed to care hardly care at all, as if he had married a housekeeper.” (13) This scene presents Reegan as an embittered man whose distaste for his work in the Garda Síochána shapes his relationships with those in the barracks and leads to his tremendous sense of ambivalence about how his life in Ireland has played out.

Reegan’s unhappiness in the barracks and his disillusionment with his position in the force is not simply a result of the tedium of the work. Instead, Reegan’s disenchantment and dissatisfaction in *The Barracks* has far more political roots. Specifically, it proceeds from his inability to reconcile his current position as a Garda with his former involvement in militant Irish Republicanism. At several points in the novel, Reegan and the other officers recall the early days of the Free State and of the Civic Guard – a force consisting in part of ex- (pro-Treaty) IRA. For instance, while having tea, Reegan and the other officers joke about the requirements needed to join the force. They discuss “the six months training in the Depot when they were nineteen or twenty, in the first days of the Irish Free State.” (28) The men seem happy to recall their early days as Gardaí, and seem nostalgic about the tremendous changes that had taken place in Ireland and had originally provided them the opportunity to become police officers. They wistfully look back on the success of Irish nationalism, remembering how:

The British had withdrawn. The capital was in a fever of excitement and change. New classes were forming . . . There was a brand new tricolour to wave high; a language of their own to learn; new anthems of faith-and-fatherland to beat on the drum of the multitude; but most of all, unseen and

savage behind these floral screens, was the struggle for the numbered seats of power. The police recruits waking the Phoenix Park . . . . (28-9)

However, as the novel develops, it becomes increasingly clear that Reegan's feelings about the independent Ireland that he defended during the Civil War do not match those of the other officers. Despite yielding to their sentimentality, Reegan soon reveals his dissipating sense of pride in his position in the Garda Síochána. In fact, it becomes obvious that, in the time since joining the force, Reegan's ideas of the Garda have deteriorated badly. Reegan's earlier that the Garda was and honourable force defending a new honourable Ireland has been replaced by his feeling that the force is nothing more than an organized "system of arselickin" (69). His disillusionment with the force is unsurprising, however, once Reegan reveals that he had, in his youth, been a militant Republican – part of a "generation wild with ideals" (109) about freeing Ireland.

In *The Barracks*, Reegan's obvious disillusionment and bitterness stems from his own position in relation to the political split in the IRA. The ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the subsequent Civil War had made enemies out of (IRA) comrades who had fought British forces alongside each other for decades. In the novel, Reegan wants nothing more than to "kick the job into their teeth and go" (109), as he finds no merit in working for the Civic Guard. However, it seems that it is his youth "fighting with a flying column in the hills" (109) that triggers his obvious distaste for the position. In other words, his transition from fighting with the Irish paramilitary to "donn[ing] the uniform of the Garda Siochana [sic] and [swearing] to preserve the peace of the Irish Free State" (109) seems a considerable influence on his unhappiness in the force. He claims, for instance, that it was "a thousand times easier to lie in a ditch with a rifle and watch down

the road at the lorries coming” because, he claims, “you had the heat of some purpose, a job to do.” (110) In the Garda, on the other hand, he feels he is simply “growing old . . . never [having] been his own boss.” (110)

Given his unhappiness with his life as a Civic Guard, it is worth noting that Reegan never articulates what exactly he gained by siding with the Free State during the Civil War. Considering the fact that Reegan was well-established as a republican soldier during the War of Independence – he “had been in charge of ambushes before he was twenty” and had been given “petty promotion [in the force] immediately because he’d won officer’s rank in the fighting” (109) – it is noteworthy that at no point in the novel does he express any reason for joining the Garda other than because “he saw nothing else worth doing.” (109) It is certainly possible that Reegan was also persuaded by the aforementioned “fever of excitement and change,” (28) but McGahern seems to insinuate that, regardless of his reasons for joining the force, the sergeant would nevertheless resent his position.

In *The Barracks*, McGahern suggests that Reegan regrets his decision to join the Garda not only because, by doing so, he essentially turned against his comrades, but also because his “disloyalty” to these men was based on an allegiance to an idealized nation that, he now sees, has failed to materialize. That is, Reegan’s unhappiness working for the Civic Guard seems to emerge both out of his sense of betrayal to his IRA comrades, and also out of his recognition that the Irish nation he had decided to serve by joining the Garda was, in effect, not worth serving. First of all, while thinking about his transition from Republican militant to police officer, Reegan “want[s] to forget, forget, forget.” (110) And though it is unclear what exactly he wants to forget, I would argue that

Reegan's claim that "it'd be better to take a gun and blow your brains out" (110) might be indicative of his remorse about supporting the authority that executed the anti-Treaty militants after the Civil War. Hopkinson notes that during the Civil War, the "executions policy ensured that the Free State would be tainted from its birth with the blood of Republican heroes and former colleagues," (192) and Reegan's graphic suicidal remark seems to suggest such "tainted" experiences. As a Garda, Reegan has survived the war, but knows, nonetheless, that his survival was contingent on his controversial decision to side with the State authority that ultimately executed his former comrades.

Likewise, as he wanders around Dublin before catching a train back to the barracks, he watches the new Garda recruits in the Depot and laughs at the "poor humpers," (117) as they remind him of "the frustration of his own situation." (117) However, more importantly, he feels that they will never fully understand the sacrifices made so they could wear the "blue uniform." (117) Unlike Reegan, they are yet blind to the "fault in the strip of the green and gold with the white between flying over the Depot, symbolizing the institution of Eire [sic]." (118) He does not demonstrate any animosity towards the men themselves, but instead seems averse to the false sense of community created by the institution of the Civic Guard as well as its unwillingness to acknowledge men, like Reegan, who actually first secured the independent nation they ostensibly serve. In Reegan's mind, the institution is dominated by pageantry and ceremony. Unlike "that movement in his youth [that] had changed his life," (109) the culture of the Garda is one of false solidarity: in one of his many meetings with Reegan, for example, "Quirke had expected a clash . . . [but] he changed affably, he wanted to show Reegan that they weren't enemies but in a team together, with a common cause and interest." (131)

However, Reegan knows that they are not a team. Unlike Reegan who, despite siding with the state during the Civil War, both recognizes the sacrifice made by “those men that won us our freedom” (208) and is haunted by it, Quirke seems indifferent to this sacrifice. The superintendent is only interested in having “a fine reputation to uphold,” (131) and unlike Reegan, “associate[s] himself with the Police Force . . . his notion of himself . . . inseparable from it.” (132)

Ultimately, Reegan makes his ambivalence towards the Garda Síochána clear during one of the novel’s final scenes in which he and Quirke come to blows. After finally resigning from his position as sergeant, Reegan stands up to his former superior and airs his many grievances. He expresses his unhappiness with “this balls of a country” (231) and points to the distinction between his role in the force and Quirke’s. Reegan cannot accept that a “successful” nation – a nation which he fought for in his youth – would promote to the position of superintendent one who, during the Civil War, “motor[ed] round to see if a few harmless poor bastards of policemen would lick me fat arse, while I shit about law and order.” (231) Reegan also reminds Quirke that he too “wore the Sam Browne . . . the one time it was dangerous to wear it” but did so “to command – men, soldiers.” (231) Reegan, here, hints at the Irish ambivalence towards the Treaty and the riskiness of siding with the Free State during the Civil War. The implication is that despite his sacrifice on both sides of the Republican spectrum – that is, as a nationalist militant and as a Free Stater – Reegan has yet to recognize any of the “great changes [that] have come over this country” (208) other than the departure of the British. Those in the Civic Guard, Reegan seems to suggest, are interested in nothing but themselves – each one cares only about being “the first to have his hand out for an

increase in salary” (132) and always ensure to “watch our own ends” (229) – and have forgotten the real struggle for independence as well as the sacrifice of Irish nationalists. Reegan feels that wearing the uniform of the Garda Síochána is akin to wearing the “slave’s uniform” (169) as he feels a slave to a failed nation. He believes that Gardaí are not worthy of defending the independent country many willingly gave up their lives to achieve. The social conditions and values of the Irish Republic that Reegan defends (conditions and values epitomized, for the sergeant, by the flawed system of the Garda Síochána, and by Quirke specifically) do not match the values he fought for in his youth, and, like Reegan, McGahern suggests, Ireland “could not have fared much worse, no matter what other way it had turned out.” (109) It takes Reegan thirty years to leave the force, but, in the end, he chooses to “go free . . . into some life of his own.” (110)

Overall, both Elizabeth and Reegan’s respective feelings of despondency and alienation stem from their inability to come to terms with how their lives as national subjects have turned out. In the barracks, both feel defined by what they have or have not done for Ireland, and essentially feel paralyzed by their national experiences. Their personal lives are constantly circumscribed by their (in)ability to perform their national duties, and yet neither ever seems to move forward. And though both Elizabeth and Reegan see Ireland changing around them, they ultimately feel unable to participate in these changes – at least in the ways in which they hope to – and so sense very little changing *for* them. Ultimately, McGahern suggests that though Elizabeth and Reegan believe they have ostensibly failed their country, Ireland’s history, too, has failed them.

### Chapter 3 “The dream was torn piecemeal”: The Pursuit of Independence and the Crisis of Autonomy in *The Dark*

Having been awarded the Macaulay Fellowship for *The Barracks*, John McGahern temporarily left his teaching position in Clontarf to travel through France, Finland, and Spain during which time he would finish his next novel, *The Dark*. Though highly anticipated due in large part to the success of *The Barracks*, McGahern’s second novel generated far more controversy and critical ambivalence than its predecessor upon its release in 1965. In fact, until his widely celebrated novel, *Amongst Women*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize nearly a quarter-century later, McGahern was arguably most famous for having had his second novel banned by the Irish Censorship Board.<sup>16</sup> In the late 1950s and early 1960s, censorship in Ireland was at its height, and, as McGahern himself recalls, “it was something of the time. If you were a writer, you half expected it . . . it was something that you lived with.” (“Interview” 55) Nevertheless, the fact that Irish authorities immediately confiscated copies of *The Dark* – the novel having been deemed obscene – courted a tremendous amount of controversy because its author was “the possessor of the only two state prizes.” (55) McGahern claims that “in a way I was almost an official writer when *The Dark* was banned,” (55) and that though “I didn’t really care for myself”, the novel’s banning “was quite a social disgrace.” (55) The

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<sup>16</sup> Eamon Maher claims that in addition to objections regarding both McGahern’s use of the word “fuck” on the novel’s first page, and his depiction of numerous explicit scenes of masturbation, what incensed the Censorship Board most was the “unappetizing and, at the time of its publication, hidden face of provincial Ireland . . . [in which] everything is couched in an atmosphere of fear and loathing.” (“Readers” 128) More specifically, according to Maher, the censors disapproved of McGahern’s portrayal of “the unsavoury aspects of Irish society during the 1950s and 1960s” and his exploration of “subjects that [were] never broached.” (129) Such subjects include the issues of domestic violence, and of the “reality of clerical sexual abuse.” (130)

banning of *The Dark*, however, was not simply a mark against McGahern as a writer; it had very real consequences for his personal life as well. Specifically, after the book's publication, McGahern was dismissed from his teaching post in the primary school where he taught. Though there remained some debate as to the reasons for his dismissal, McGahern himself later confirmed that it was indeed due to the banning of his second novel.<sup>17</sup> In any event, McGahern had fallen victim to Ireland's social conservatism whose roots he explored in his novels, and following the scandal surrounding *The Dark* in the mid-'60s, left Ireland for England where he would remain for nearly a decade before returning to his home country.

Upon its publication, *The Dark* received far more mixed reviews from critics than *The Barracks*. Certainly several commentators appreciated this latter work; however, many also felt that the novel's minimal scope, its repetitiveness, and its unnamed teenaged protagonist were "insufficiently realized and . . . not a proper focus for the 'philosophy' about life in the novel." (Malcolm 30) The slightly more experimental *The Dark* has much in common with *The Barracks*, though critics often consider it a far "bleaker" novel than its predecessor. Neil Corcoran, for instance, describes the novel as exemplary of McGahern's fiction in that it treats "rural Irish hatred and self-pity, that

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<sup>17</sup> In the years following the publication of *The Barracks*, while McGahern was finishing *The Dark*, he had married a Finnish woman Annikki Laaksi (to whom *The Dark* is dedicated), and, furthermore, had not done so in a church. This marriage was considered to be unorthodox, and many early critics had presumed that McGahern's break from convention in his personal life was as much to blame for his termination as a teacher. However, McGahern set the record straight in an interview the 1980s. He describes the parish priest's utter confusion and annoyance that "I was married and didn't get married in a church," ("Interview" 57) but holds that it was the archbishop's "absolute obsession about what he called impure books" (56) that led to his dismissal. Despite only receiving a letter claiming "Mr. McGahern is well aware of the reason of his dismissal," the writer affirms, when asked if the headmaster "actually [said] that the banning of *The Dark* was behind the loss of your job," that "he did . . . he was quite clear." (57)

obscuring and obscurantist darkness through which all of [the] characters must fumble their way.” (88) Similarly, John Cronin claims that *The Dark* “is so determinedly bleak that [McGahern] runs the risk of finding it impossible to bring it to any kind of convincing conclusion,” (428) while F.C. Molloy argues that “McGahern is determined to force his bleak world on the reader – the scene must be gloomy, the minor characters must be frustrated, and come what may, young Mahoney must live out a life of despair.” (16) Like *The Barracks*, *The Dark* portrays life in the Irish countryside in the middle decades of the twentieth-century. The novel, which has elicited comparisons with Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, deals with the formative years of its protagonist, Mahoney, and traces his early life trying to break free from the household run by his physically and sexually abusive father.<sup>18</sup> The boy’s mother has long since passed away, and he and his sisters live in constant fear of their father’s volatile and violent temper. The bulk of the novel deals with Mahoney’s teenage years, and his endeavour to determine whether he will remain home and work the land with his father, whether he will pursue his studies at the university, or whether he will fulfil his promise to his deceased mother and join the priesthood. The boy struggles to decide which path to follow, and this difficulty is exacerbated by his blossoming and uncontrollable teenage sexuality as well as the pressures he feels from the figures of authority around him.

Though somewhat more implicitly, *The Dark*, like *The Barracks*, both traces the psychology of its protagonist amidst legacies of Irish national history and reveals how, in Ireland, the personal is inevitably bound up with the national. As David Malcolm argues,

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<sup>18</sup> As the novel employs the same name, Mahoney, to designate both the young protagonist and his father, I will, for the sake of clarity, differentiate between them by referring to the young main character as Mahoney, and referring to his father exclusively as Mahoney Sr..

*The Dark* functions as “a complex piece of psychological portraiture and a despairing vision of life . . . [which] comments indirectly and directly on social life in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s.” (43) However, despite agreeing with Malcolm that in the novel McGahern examines the realities of life in Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, I would add that the issue of Ireland’s independence underpins Mahoney’s own and leads to the novel’s “despairing vision of life.” Though the novel depicts Mahoney’s difficulties in shaping his identity in the late ‘50s and ‘60s, I feel that McGahern uses these difficulties to hint at the broader consequences of Ireland’s struggle for independence.

In this section, I will argue that McGahern deploys the notion of independence in *The Dark* in two key ways, and that it is the intersection between Mahoney’s frustrated independence and his environment – an environment shaped by the legacies of Irish national independence – from which the novel acquires its bleakness. I will first argue that McGahern’s representation of the young Mahoney’s lengthy personal struggle to escape from his tyrannical father and to define his own place in the world is symbolic of Ireland’s own historic campaign for independence from Britain, and, more importantly, the country’s difficulty in establishing itself as an autonomous political entity. In other words, I will demonstrate that the reasons behind Mahoney’s desire for autonomy as well as the difficulties he encounters while trying to forge a meaningful independent self both function as metaphors for the challenges Ireland faced before and after achieving independence. On the other hand, I will also argue that Mahoney’s more overt feelings of helplessness and dissatisfaction stem from his inability to navigate his post-independence Irish environment. That is, I will suggest that the social conditions of post-independence Ireland precipitate Mahoney’s disillusionment with his life, and also cause what Mary

Ann Melfi has called the boy's "emotional and spiritual void." (118) Overall, I will show that by engaging with the issues of national (Irish) and personal (Mahoney's) independence in *The Dark*, McGahern addresses the social disillusionment of the mid-century by challenging previously held convictions that the Irish might make a clean break from Britain and establish "a radically adventurous programme to restore . . . the vitality residual in a nation devastated by a colonial power," (Brown, *History* 13) and, in effect, by denouncing the "exhilarating ideals . . . which had been crystallized in the heroic crucible of [Irish nationalism]." (14)

In *The Dark*, it is with regard to the issue of violence that Mahoney's attempt to shape an independent identity most obviously resembles Ireland's historical struggle for independence. Just as armed resistance and violent rebellion played a considerable role in achieving independence in Ireland, violence in McGahern's novel both provokes Mahoney's desire to escape the authority of his father, and also functions as one of the key elements Mahoney resists thereby demonstrating his own independence. First of all, from the outset, Mahoney's life is defined by his hostile relationship with his father and his sense of imprisonment in his father's home. The first and arguably most upsetting scene in the novel, for instance, shows Mahoney Sr. punishing his son by humiliating him in front of his sisters.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, despite the promising start to a fishing trip early in the novel, the outing quickly deteriorates when Mahoney Sr. aggressively castigates his children for getting their fishing-lines tangled. The years of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse Mahoney suffers in the house leave the boy feeling as if "nothing

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<sup>19</sup> McGahern's use of profanity and his depictions of sexual violence in this scene proved too explicit for the censors. Eamon Maher, for instance, characterizes this scene – a scene in which Mahoney's father repeatedly whips the chair over which the boy is bent, naked, and crying – as "the most shocking [scene] I have ever read." ("Disintegration" 88)

seemed to matter any more” (10) and never would so long as he remained in his father’s home. The children “all got beatings, often for no reason, [just] because . . . he was in a foul humour,” (11) and, for Mahoney, these beatings seem an inevitable part of life. Mary Ann Melfi suggests that “in *The Dark* a firm faith in the possibility of a bright future is a struggle for young Mahoney.” (113) The hostile environment created by Mahoney Sr. shapes the boy’s life and his abuse seems an insurmountable obstacle for the boy. However, by the same token, it is this violence that precipitates Mahoney’s desire to set off on his own, to leave his father behind, and to create a new life for himself. In other words, though as a boy he can do nothing about it, the abuse Mahoney suffers at the hands of his father nevertheless leads him to vow never “to be like his father if he could . . . he’d walk [his] way through life towards the unnameable heaven of joy, not his father’s path.” (25) Just as nationalists in Ireland sought independence due to the various socio-political injustices suffered under British rule, on a very basic level, Mahoney Sr.’s tendency to abuse his authority over his children compels Mahoney to break out of his father’s home, and free himself from the older man’s authority.<sup>20</sup>

Violence in *The Dark* certainly instigates Mahoney’s desire for freedom.

However, it is in his portrayal of Mahoney’s “non-violent” or “psychological” resistance to Mahoney Sr.’s abuse in the novel that McGahern seems to see a truly valuable display of autonomy. In one particular scene from *The Dark*, for example, Mahoney’s anger and

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, in the novel’s final scene, the young man ends up in bed with his father once again. Despite all of his efforts to break free from his father’s abusive authority, the boy ultimately returns to this authority, finally realizing the difficulty in making such a clean break. This turn of events recalls Ireland’s inability to enact any sort of successful political or economic program of self-sufficiency, as well as the country’s (unofficial) sustained dependence on Britain, which, nearly three decades after Irish independence, continued, according to Lee, to “treat Irish immigrants as Commonwealth citizens, and to offer a special relationship to the Irish economy.” (300)

hatred for his father boils over while the man violently beats one of the boy's sisters. The boy has had enough of his father's senseless, unprovoked, and unjustifiable brutality, and refuses to stand by any longer. While Mahoney Sr. delivers a "heavy beating" (34) to the boy's sister, the boy, driven by "years of stored hatred," (36) confronts his father seemingly aware of his own vulnerability. He remains undeterred when, following his affront, his father slaps him "with his whole strength across the face," (36) and claims that he is "so mad with strength" that he "didn't even feel the [dresser's] white knob drive into your side." (36) Mahoney never actually fights his father, nor does he ever believe he might stop the beating. However, McGahern shows that it is in Mahoney's challenge to his father that he reveals his emerging independence. Mahoney Sr., falls "back without striking, as if he sensed, mixture of incomprehension and fear on the face. [His] world . . . a shattered place," (36) as he sees for the first time that his son might no longer be so acquiescent and so submissive.

In this scene, it is the strength of Mahoney's principles, and not his actual ability to stop his father, which, McGahern suggests, is a victory for the boy. Certainly, Mahoney's personal conviction becomes apparent to his father when the former threatens to kill him, but more importantly, it is this conviction which reveals, stimulates, and epitomizes the boy's own sense of independence. McGahern emphasizes that it is this "ideology" of resistance, and not the violent act itself, that is a worthwhile marker of Mahoney's growing confidence and developing autonomy. In other words, it is the boy's desire to resist Mahoney Sr. – regardless of the man's ability to "batter and beat away as [he] always did" (38) – that McGahern puts forth as the most significant way Mahoney achieves a meaningful or productive autonomous identity. McGahern's view about the

value of Mahoney's ability to resist his father's abuse mirrors his idea regarding republican violence in Ireland. Such violence, he claims "was felt . . . to be a mistake" ("Glorious" 125), and, considering his portrayal of Mahoney's "non-violent" resistance, seems to question (though provide no conclusive thoughts on) the value of an independent country shaped by a history of violence.

Mahoney's attempt to break free from his father's aggressive authority in McGahern's novel also parallels, in certain ways, Irish cultural nationalism. Just as nationalists attempted to "cultivate precisely that which made it different to England" and "argued that a recognition of Irish difference was the first and most important step in redefining the Anglo-Irish political relationship," (22) Mahoney's desire to escape Mahoney Sr.'s home is born out of the boy's fundamental feeling of difference. In other words, like Irish nationalists who sought independence on cultural as well as political grounds, Mahoney desires freedom from his father because he feels a deep-seated difference between them at the level of morality or propriety; he feels that his beliefs and values are completely disparate from his father's. For example, the cynical Mahoney Sr. puts very little stock in his son's abilities – or in anyone's abilities for that matter – to succeed as anything but a farmer like him. Throughout the novel, he is repeatedly quick to dismiss the value of studying to do well in school. He believes that his son's hard work in school is pointless, as "only the ones with the pull will get the jobs." (115) Until the younger Mahoney actually passes his examinations, his father shows a complete lack of faith in his son who himself believes that he might in fact be good enough to make it to the university. Similarly, Mahoney Sr.'s desire to display his superiority is fundamentally incongruous with Mahoney's. When the boy ends up receiving the scholarship, for

instance, Mahoney Sr. insists that they go out to celebrate by eating lunch in an expensive restaurant and by buying the boy new clothes. Mahoney obliges, but immediately regrets this decision when the “promise of celebration in style” (156) turns into an outing in which the boy is forced to play “a part in Mahoney [Sr.]’s joy,” to “celebrat[e] Mahoney [Sr.]’s joy and not his own.” (153) The boy is certainly proud of his accomplishment, but seems happy simply to have received the award. Moreover, he wants to use the award to “share joy . . . he wanted it to be theirs as much as his.” (152) However, as his father parades him around the town, Mahoney comes to resent the man further, but, more importantly, begins to loathe the scholarship itself because it becomes a tool by which Mahoney Sr. boasts about his family’s superiority. At the hands of Mahoney Sr., the award becomes an instrument of segregation instead of community, pointing once again to the disparity between Mahoney’s father’s values and his own.

Nevertheless, when Mahoney, having broken free from his domineering father’s home, finally arrives in Galway where he is to begin his courses at the University, his dream of autonomy begins to unravel. Nowhere in the novel is the trajectory of Mahoney’s independence more clearly suggestive of Ireland’s move from British colony to autonomous nation. Just as the realities of independence (especially in the 1950s) failed to meet the expectations of the Irish, the excitement and anticipation Mahoney feels about the freedom he believes he will find in Galway are quickly replaced by an overwhelming sense of confusion and anxiety. As Mahoney sets out for the university, he expects to find, for the first time in his life, “a beautiful place, all its people beautiful.” (152) For Mahoney, finally leaving home to attend the university means being able to abandon the abuse and the failed family relations that defined his childhood. More importantly, the

university offers the possibility of independence. However, despite momentarily feeling that “it was still wonderful to be just there,” (168) once the boy arrives in Galway, his expectations of what life might be like free from his father’s authority, immediately begin to deteriorate. His desire to finally find himself a girlfriend – a desire that flows through the entire the novel and which shapes much of the young Mahoney’s life – is quashed by his inability to muster the courage to attend a dance and meet girls. Venturing to the city provides Mahoney a real opportunity to get acquainted with girls his own age, and yet the young man is unable to make the most of this opportunity. The night of the dance, arguably the night for which Mahoney has spent his whole life waiting, proves a major letdown. Mahoney is incapable of even getting himself to the dance, and believes that he will “never be able to take any natural part in life, get any natural fulfilment.” (176)

In a similar way, the boy’s optimism about the university “was torn piecemeal . . . before the [first] week was over.” (172) From the outset, “fear close to despair came at the image of failing or getting sick or losing the Scholarship.” (174) He cannot stand the idea of having to “fall back on Mahoney [Sr.] for support.” (174)<sup>21</sup> During his first class, the young man is humiliated by the professor, an incident which leaves him completely disillusioned and forces him to wonder how the autonomy for which he has yearned could result in this “crippling flush of shame.” (180) Ultimately, the “constant dread of sickness and failure” (179) compels the young Mahoney to leave the “brilliant career” (184) he once thought he might have at the university, and take up a far less rewarding clerk’s

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<sup>21</sup> The young man’s anxiety about falling back on his father for support reflects one of the arguments pro-Treaty nationalists used against the possibility of a Civil War. Supporters of the Treaty suggested that, should the Irish Free State go to war, the country would risk giving the British a reason to return to Ireland thereby negating the independence so recently achieved.

position at the Electricity Supply Board in Dublin. Galway, the university, and independence all fall far short of the idealized notions he had imagined. Like the Free State, the young man is unable to adapt to the realities of independence and finds himself living “the same habitual actions . . . as always,” (171) finally accepting that maybe he was “not able to face it.” (176)

Overall, Mahoney’s move from living under his father’s oppressive guardianship to achieving a measure of autonomy – an autonomy that proves fundamentally incongruous with what the boy had originally expected – shares many features with Ireland’s own struggle for and transition to independence. Not only are the reasons for wanting independence and the methods for demonstrating it similar in both cases, so too are the disappointing results of actually acquiring independence. However, though many of *The Dark*’s harrowing and depressing features emerge from the parallels McGahern draws between the flawed ideals of his country’s campaign for autonomy and Mahoney’s own, the novel’s bleak presentation of life in Ireland also stems from McGahern’s more overt criticism of the social legacies of independence. In other words, though McGahern obliquely uses Mahoney’s fraught sense of autonomy to express Ireland’s historical tendency to idealize independence, he also handles more explicitly the inauspicious social realities that his own post-independence generation inherited.

By the time *The Dark* was published, Ireland was more than thirty years removed from independence. Furthermore, McGahern himself had been born over a decade after the establishment of the Irish Free State. Nevertheless, the social legacies of independence feature prominently in McGahern’s second novel, and, I will now argue, serve to highlight the man’s belief that Mahoney’s disillusionment in his mid-century

context stems from his perceived inability to navigate a landscape shaped by the social failures of the Free State.

Throughout *The Dark*, as Mahoney considers the various ways he might escape his father's overbearing authority, he becomes keenly aware of the difficulty in negotiating his contemporary social conditions. However, Mahoney also fully realizes to what degree this difficulty arises from the early days of Irish independence. His aspirations, his abilities, and his life more generally are all circumscribed by the legacies of Irish nationalism, or, more specifically, of independence. One of the most significant concerns with which Mahoney grapples in the novel, for instance, consists of whether or not to join the priesthood. Before his mother's death, the boy had promised her that he would "one day . . . say Mass for her," (33) and this promise torments him as he struggles to figure out whether or not he truly has a vocation to the priesthood. The influence and importance of the Church are unmistakable in Mahoney's provincial surroundings, and the boy's deliberations are quite clearly impacted by the its "mythology of rural contentment and piety." (Maher, "Readers" 126) At several points in the novel, the boy feels overcome with happiness after participating in religious ceremonies. After confession, for example, Mahoney expresses a renewed sense of optimism and joy: after exiting the confessional, he sees "the people kneeling there, all washed in wonder . . . how beautiful the world was . . . in the state of grace, you remembered you were supposed to love everyone." (42-3) Later, he envisions himself as a priest belonging "to these people, as they to you, you were linked together. One day that sacred host would be your burden to uphold for them." (58) And, despite the joy the Church tends to bring Mahoney, the boy also has his doubts and reservations about joining the priesthood. He

knows, for example, that the priest's life is one of tremendous isolation: "a priest has to do it utterly alone, alone with his life and his God." (100) Likewise, he senses that a life dedicated to God might be a life "cheated . . . out of human fulfilment." (84) In simple terms, Mahoney vacillates a great deal when he considers becoming a priest. However, I would suggest, here, that Mahoney's ambivalence towards the priesthood can be attributed in part to the lasting influence of Irish independence.

In light of the Church's importance in the post-independence years, the amount of thought that Mahoney puts into his decision to join or not join the priesthood, as well as the stress and anxiety he feels in having to make this decision, becomes unsurprising. The Church has proved its staying power in independent Ireland, and the priesthood seems a rewarding and distinguished profession. However, I would argue that the uncertainty and distress Mahoney feels about the priesthood has less to do with his ability to perform the duties (though this is certainly part of it), and more to do with his realization that there is little else available to him. Mahoney Sr.'s repeated assertion that only those "with the pull will get the jobs" (115) reminds Mahoney that, in Ireland, meaningful employment is hard to come by. His options, he sees, are limited: he can join the priesthood, farm with his father (and resign himself to a life of unhappiness), or attempt to win the scholarship and risk studying for naught. In this way, it seems defensible to suggest that what originally drives the boy towards the priesthood – effectively trumping both his promise to his mother, and the influence of the Church in Ireland – is the near-absence of any feasible alternative, or, at the very least, the absence of any certain alternative. The employment conditions Mahoney's (and McGahern's) generation inherited from both the early years of independence and the years of neutrality during the War – a move Killeen

argues was born out of Ireland's autonomy and "demonstrated its independence in the most emphatic way" (100) – are as much to blame for the boy's indecision as is his ostensibly dubious moral worth. Though he believes the decision at hand is whether or not he is pious enough to be a priest – after several "private orgies of abuse," the boy feels, "I'd never be a priest. I might as well be honest. I'd never be anything. It was certain." (33) – the real issue is a social (and historical) one, and has to do with whether or not he can afford to do anything else. In other words, though Mahoney's inner turmoil seems the key issue precipitating his difficulty in making a decision regarding the priesthood, I am suggesting that it is the underlying issue related to Ireland's post-independence social conditions that regulates the boy's decision, and ultimately exacerbates his disillusionment and dejection. Mahoney cannot deny the discouraging number of employment opportunities available to him, which is why, when he finally tells Father Gerald that "I don't think I'm able for to be a priest," (99) he not only feels uncertain about his decision, but also even more hopeless about his future: "now that it was lost, this house with the priest and John seemed a world where you could have stayed . . . But that was changed, it was lost, and there was a horror . . . about it now that it was lost." (103)

Just as Mahoney's Irish milieu is shaped by unfavourable employment conditions carried forward from the days of the Free State, the issue of class – an issue explored by several prominent Irish nationalists during the struggle for independence – also dictates Mahoney's social situation and amplifies his disillusionment with this situation. Due to figures like James Connolly, for example, the campaign for Irish independence always had a considerable socialist tinge. As Peter Shirlow notes, "the Easter Rising and

Proclamation of 1916 combined demands for national self-determination and a heady mix of socialism, based upon the restoration of what was perceived as the Gaelic system of social communalism.” (91)<sup>22</sup> After independence was achieved, the Irish government established policies based on the notion that “a merger of national identity and economic isolationism would serve both cross-class and sovereign interests.” (91) However, the government’s inability to properly address the issue of unemployment, coupled with the tremendous exodus of Ireland’s rural population towards urban centers, and the largely unsuccessful bid to cultivate Ireland’s Gaelic roots posed a considerable challenge to the actual emergence of a new “independent” class with a distinctly nationalist consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, despite the socialist dimension of Irish nationalism, the social realities in the decades following independence, as Marilyn Silverman argues, affected “the complexity of local life such that . . . profound ambivalences were invariably (re)created between lived experience and political ideas and between class experience and personal understandings.” (358)

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<sup>22</sup> Despite believing that the Gaelic form of social communalism – a system built around the “communal ownership of land,” (12) which stood in stark contrast to English feudalism – would “undoubtedly have given way to the privately owned system of capitalist-landlordism, even if Ireland had remained an independent country,” (12) James Connolly’s emphasis on the return to this system stemmed from his belief that the colonial legacies of this change have “been bitterly and justly resented by the vast majority of the Irish people, many of whom still mix with their dreams of liberty longings for a return to [this] ancient system of land tenure – now organically impossible.” (12)

<sup>23</sup> Despite the Irish government’s failure to genuinely promote the spread of Gaelic culture including, as mentioned above, the Irish language, one aspect of Gaelic culture that did flourish in Free State was Gaelic sport. Marilyn Silverman attributes this to the fact that “GAA teams . . . cut across class boundaries.” (346) By “espousing a unifying ideology and cultural nationalism through sport” Silverman claims, the GAA “fractured labouring-class experience by creating spatial loyalties, by banning those who played English sports as a result of their ties to particular employers, and by becoming implicated in party politics which themselves were divisive of working-class sentiment.” (346)

In McGahern's *The Barracks*, the officers of the Garda Síochána describe how, in the early days of the Irish Free State, "new classes were forming" and those "who had worried how their next loaf or day might come were attending ceremonial functions." (B 28) However, later in McGahern's first novel, it becomes apparent that the reality of an emerging middle-class in independent Ireland might have been somewhat overstated. Towards the end of the novel, one such officer, Casey, concedes that it is only now that Ireland is beginning to reap "the fruits that those men that won us our freedom sowed." (208) He suggests that, unlike his generation who "were awed of putting their foot inside the door of the Shelbourne Hotel because they weren't the so-called gentry," there is now "a new class growing up in this country that won't be shamed out of doing things because they haven't come out of big houses." (208-9) The point, here, is that though characters like Casey continue to anticipate the emergence of an Irish middle class, this development has yet to really occur. In many ways, the perception of this growing middle-class (that is, its possibility if not its actuality) seems to function as a justification for an independent state that has yet to fully pan out. In other words, the disparity between the characters' notions of the developing classes in Ireland and the reality of the situation suggests that these notions serve only to vindicate Ireland's independence, in effect, providing a future they might work towards to counter the depressing conditions of their present.

In *The Dark*, Mahoney feels the full effect of this disparity. During Mahoney's first encounter with Father Gerald, for example, the priest reveals to the boy that he "may not have to slave on any farm" because "times have changed. There are openings and opportunities today that never were before." (D 25) Likewise, at his own home, the priest notes that his servant boy, John, and Mahoney are "in unequal positions." (64) In

attempting to endear himself to the boy, Father Gerald comments on the way in which the “unsophisticated” John has placed statuettes on the mantelpiece: “absolutely no sense of taste, a very uncultivated people even after forty years of freedom the mass of Irish are.” (65) Father Gerald insinuates, of course, that Mahoney is not one these uncultivated brutes, and suggests that his own inability to “make silk out of a sow’s ear” (65) with John, might have a different outcome with Mahoney. In essence, Father Gerald makes it clear that Mahoney is part of the first generation in Ireland that will be defined in part by class differences. Mahoney is clearly aware, then, that, in Father Gerald’s eyes, he is a candidate for upward social mobility.

However, the boy inevitably feels unable, inadequate, and unwilling to join in this new emerging class. Though Father Gerald has emphasized that “most of us in Ireland will soon be [part of the bourgeoisie],” that “fear of the poor house is gone,” and that “the life your father brought you up in won’t last hardly twenty years more,” (99) Mahoney is painfully aware that he is not (yet) part of this emerging class, and, as such, is troubled by the prospective difficulties in actually joining this class. For example, when he and Mahoney Sr. go to the Royal Hotel to eat – a scene that obviously echoes Casey’s description, in *The Barracks*, of the lower classes entering the Shelbourne Hotel – their interactions with the staff and the other patrons are uncomfortable and strained. The pair try “to cover [their] unease” in the room full of “anglers from England . . . [and] commercial travellers,” (156) and the young man feels particularly embarrassed about “not knowing how to use the different knives and forks” and dreads being thought of as a “country ass.” (158) Similarly, as he arrives in Galway to attend the university – the first destination of his upwardly mobile generation – he finds that he feels absolutely out of

place. The university dream for Mahoney had always been a dream about leaving his oppressive domestic circumstances. However, after eventually getting to Galway, he realizes that he is expected to one day leave the university finally able to make the transition into a higher social class. The pressure of social improvement proves too much for Mahoney whose “doubts grew as you wandered, you wanted less and less to stay.” (174) Ultimately, the obligation to take his place in the bourgeois class that Father Gerald had anticipated leads Mahoney to accept the E.S.B. clerkship in Dublin. Despite the possibility of getting “a much more pleasant job than the E.S.B. out of the University,” (187) and, presumably, a higher social status, Mahoney’s ambitions are reduced to simply achieving a social status that is higher than the one he currently occupies. He feels utterly alone, smothered by the expectations of social mobility, and so, unsurprisingly, jumps at the opportunity offered by the E.S.B.. After years struggling to achieve a measure of happiness, Mahoney gives it all up for the guarantee of having “a pay straight away, an increment every year . . . chances for promotion, and a pension.” (185) He ultimately accepts the unhappiness of a tedious and monotonous position in Dublin, all for the promise of some upward social movement.<sup>24</sup>

All in all, in McGahern’s *The Dark*, Mahoney’s mid-century world is shaped by the legacies of Irish independence. Just as the unfortunate outcome of Mahoney’s

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<sup>24</sup> It is probably no accident that McGahern essentially ends *The Dark* by pointing to the tedious nature of the position that Mahoney accepts at the E.S.B.. Mahoney has sought to escape his father’s farm where Mahoney Sr.’s aggressive authority runs unchecked, but, in so doing, ultimately accepts a monotonous job that echoes that of Reegan’s in *The Barracks*. Interestingly, Mahoney will find his escape from the farm in the tedious paperwork involved in his clerkship. The exact opposite is true for Reegan, who seeks refuge from the monotony of his job as a Garda by farming the land around the barracks. In an interesting way, *The Dark* ends where *The Barracks* begins, and so demonstrates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of personal satisfaction in the Irish social landscape of McGahern’s fiction.

transition from boy to man reflects the flawed ideology of Irish independence, the events and experiences that influence his life retrospectively indicate the failure of Irish nationalism. Mahoney remains paralyzed by his social conditions throughout the novel, but consistently feels the need to move forward. There is no achieving independence for Mahoney, especially in a post-independence Ireland. His depressing suggestion at the end of the novel that trying to establish a true sense of autonomy is pointless, “it didn’t matter, you could begin again and again all your life,” (188) seems to characterize the ethos of both Mahoney and McGahern’s mid-century Ireland. For Mahoney, there is very little hope in an Ireland that is fundamentally static and unchanging, and if *The Dark* is any indication, McGahern, too, believes his country is set to go “on all the time in the same way.” (191)

## Chapter 4 Conclusion

Reflecting on the aftermath of *The Dark*'s banning, McGahern asserts, "I wrote because I needed to write. I needed to – that's the way I wanted to think and see for myself." ("Interview" 62) Writing enabled McGahern to engage with his social environment, and, more importantly, to create out of this environment a "totally free world." (62) The objections to his second novel did not deter him from seeing it as a valuable text. "[A] writer will unconsciously reflect his society," he claims, and so "if you want to have a cleaner literature, first of all you have to get a cleaner society." (62) Of his place in this Irish society, McGahern recalls being part of "the first generation of people born into an independent state." (64) And though there was much to appreciate in these new national conditions, the writer feels that the "very young and insecure state" also attempted to breed an "isolate[d] society [that would] conform to a very limited, narrow idea of itself." (65)

This problem of conforming to Ireland's "idea of itself" is what torments the characters of McGahern's early novels. However, the problem is not rooted so much in their unwillingness to adhere to the country's social rules, or to occupy a position within this society. Neither Elizabeth, nor Reegan, nor Mahoney are, of course, overly rebellious. Instead, their problems with conforming to this idea stem from their inability to find in Ireland's history any set of stable features which might define this Irish social category. In both *The Barracks* and *The Dark*, the past proves crucial to the characters' understandings of the present. Any and all of the characters' attempts to find meaning in their life, to connect with others, to fulfil their personal desires, and to assert their identities are circumscribed by a country that is both eager to move forward, and yet

shackled by its history. The legacies of history and the “[crippling] inner and outer pressures” (Sampson, *Outstaring* 63) of expectation disrupt any social progress, and thwart the characters’ desire to achieve “an affirmative and clear sense of purpose within Irish society.” (62) Isolation, alienation, and withdrawal result, as these characters, according to Sampson, “have an urgent need to feel the authenticity of their own existence in the here and now,” but are prevented from doing so by the perpetual “anguish of time passing” (39) and passed.

For McGahern, it seems, to be Irish is to be heir to an especially diverse set of responsibilities. The past, though gone, is inescapable, and the future, though not arrived, is inevitable. And despite producing the tensions between the inheritance of history and the accountability to the future – tensions whose full force on the Irish psyche McGahern demonstrates through the characters of Elizabeth, Reegan, and Mahoney – Ireland’s mid-century social stagnation and emotional and intellectual isolation would give way to a period in which, as Hand asserts, “people believed in such a thing as society and that its betterment was an achievable end.” (240) In his later writing, McGahern himself would even begin to toy with the idea of the prospect of “betterment”. Without fully abandoning his suspicious and sombre attitude, he would, as Eileen Kennedy suggests, eventually find that “the freedom to grow into personhood comes from throwing off the powerful parental forces [i.e. the forces of history and of destiny] that have shaped one; that one comes into some fullness of being by choosing, whatever insecurities follow, freedom.” (123) And though this truly modern decision to venture on without knowing what lies ahead was still several years off in McGahern’s oeuvre, it nevertheless did arrive. In the end, it seems, for McGahern the value lies in taking “time to understand what to be Irish

was . . . [as] it's our country, and one should make the best of it." (McGahern, "Interview" 63-4) Understanding the self, the individual, was central for the man; after that, one only has to "let the world come or pass in whatever shape it would." (*D* 95)

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