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by Richard Burr Lloyd

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EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY
EMPORIA, KANSAS

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SCHOOL OF GRADUATE
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JAMES F. LOVELL, *Dean*

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critical attention given him was limited to a synopsis or stylistic analysis of his novels, as well as some biographical sketches.[1] It wasn't until Eileen Kennedy's article in 1983 and Shaun O'Connell's in 1984 that attempts were made to study the thematic structure of McGahern's novels as a whole. Kennedy argues that "*The Pornographer,* despite its lurid title, is essentially conservative, a circling back to the ideas and values explored in McGahern's first novel *The Barracks*" (115), and O'Connell asserts that "in *The Pornographer* McGahern turns his hero homeward, back to the same rural Ireland his early characters could not wait to leave" (255). While both Kennedy and O'Connell assert that *The Pornographer* circles back to ideas presented in the earlier novels, they fail to clearly express how that circling back helps further shape and define McGahern's vision.

In his first three novels McGahern presents a dark and bleak view of Irish society and Irish life. *The Barracks,* McGahern's first novel, centers itself on the Reegan family and their futile attempts to find some illumination in their lives to relieve the darkness, or what Thomas Kilroy calls the "withering constriction, the landscape of inhibition" (302).[2] Elizabeth Reegan, the mother and protagonist in the novel, becomes the "suffering, sensitive figure at the center" (Kilroy 302). She discovers that she has cancer, and faced with impending death she searches for some meaning in her life. McGahern does not, however, allow her to find any answers to her questions, and thus, she dies accepting the fact that she cannot know life's mystery. While her problems are central to the novel, her adopted son, Willie, has problems that are central to McGahern's imagination. His attempt to find light in the novel fails also, and as a result his quest is taken up by the protagonists in later novels, Mahoney in *The Dark,* Patrick Moran in *The Leavetaking,* and the nameless narrator in *The Pornographer.*[3]

1. See Bruce Cook's article that discusses the many personal experiences of McGahern's life that appear in his novels. Cook's article also concurs with F. C. Molloy's article that *The Dark* has apparent structural flaws. For an opposite opinion of the structural technique used in *The Dark,* see Paul Devine's article.

2. As critics observe, The Reegan family in *The Barracks* is also the family of focus in McGahern's other three novels. Even though the family names are different in each novel, the similarities in locale, family size, family professions, and family deaths all provide sufficient imagistic connections to support the view that McGahern is writing about one family throughout his novels, and thus, the treatment of the novels as a focus on one family will be used in this paper.

3. The first two protagonists come from the west of Ireland; both are originally from a farm; both lose their mother to cancer when they are young; and both had mothers that wanted them to become a priest. In *The Pornographer* the connections are not as clear but the protagonist is still from the west of Ireland; his family owned a farm; his mother is dead; and he is a former teacher.

The mother's death from cancer in *The Barracks* is important to the development of McGahern's second and third novels, *The Dark* and *The Leavetaking.* In these novels McGahern still imagines Ireland as oppressive and dreary, and there is still the "suffering, sensitive figure at the center." The protagonist in these novels, like Elizabeth in *The Barracks,* searches for that illuminosity that will relieve the constricting darkness. Yet in these two novels, the protagonist associates that lifting of the darkness with a promise he had made to his dying mother: "One day I'd say Mass for her" (D 26) (L 85). The protagonist assumes that if he becomes a priest, as his mother desired, he will be able to fulfill his promise, and by doing so, lift the darkness with the light of Catholicism, the dominant religion of Ireland. As such it is clear that McGahern intended the Mass to be not only a literal affirmation of the protagonist's mother, but also a symbolic affirmation of her religion (Catholicism) and of her country (Ireland). However, the protagonist never becomes a priest because he cannot lead a celibate life, and thus, his promise goes unfulfilled. At the end of *The Leavetaking* the protagonist, in an effort to rid himself of his guilt-ridden memories of his mother and of his vow, decides to flee Ireland and take refuge in England in the arms of an American woman. By leaving Ireland for a protestant American, McGahern's vision is still unresolved. However, in *The Pornographer* McGahern's vision becomes more optimistic. In the novel, the protagonist grows into a new understanding of his life. He realizes that life cannot be a continual series of leavetakings from his problems. Thus, he decides to follow the "true" road, a road that leads him back to the Irish countryside of his youth. While there, he decides to stay, to propose marriage to a country girl—a woman most like his mother—and to return to his inherited farm. Thus, McGahern's vision comes full circle; his protagonist has finally lifted the darkness from "the landscape of inhibition." In this fourth novel, McGahern has resolved the problems announced in *The Barracks* and developed in *The Dark* and *The Leavetaking.* In *The Pornographer,* the protagonist has affirmed Ireland with all her attendant problems; he has symbolically said his mass for "her."

In his first novel, *The Barracks.* McGahern vividly depicts the problems of Ireland in bleak and dark terms. The novel, set in a small rural village in the west of Ireland, centers itself on the Reegan family (Sergeant Reegan, his three children from his first wife, and their stepmother Elizabeth), and their search for some illuminosity to relieve the darkness, the Irish "landscape of inhibi-

tion." From the outset of the novel, McGahern describes the hopelessness and drabness of the family's environment.

> Mrs. Reegan darned an old woollen sock as the February night came on, her head bent, catching the threads on the needle by the light of the fire, the daylight gone without her noticing. A boy of twelve and two dark-haired girls were close about her at the fire. They'd grown uneasy in the way children can indoors in the failing light. The bright golds and scarlets of the religious pictures on the walls had faded. . . . The wind and rain rattling at the windowpanes seemed to grow part of the spell of silence and increasing darkness, the spell of the long darning-needle flashing in the woman's hand and it was with a visible strain that the boy managed at last to break their fear of the coming night. (7)

In this opening passage McGahern makes it clear that the coming of night is not seen by the Reegans as peaceful or pleasant; instead, the uneasiness of the children emphasizes that night brings not warmth, but fear. Also from this passage, McGahern points out that even the many religious ornaments in the Reegan home are dulled and faded. F. C. Molloy comments that "the religious bric-a-brac (faded picture, burning lamp, wickerwork crib), Elizabeth's darning, and the table set for tea all add up to a picture of sameness—a typical Irish household caught in a moment of stasis—drab, conventional, and unimaginative" (6). Even the youngest child, Willie (McGahern's protagonist in the next three novels), realizes the need for some illumination to relieve the "fear of the coming night," and thus in the next passage he queries Elizabeth: "Is it time to light the lamp yet?" (7). Although the lighting of the Sacred Heart lamp provides some brightness against the coming night, McGahern is quick to assert, when the Reegan's kneel to say their nightly prayers, that the light is temporary and illusory:

> They droned into the "Apostles' Creed." The "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys" and "Glory be to the Fathers" were repeated over and over in their relentless monotony, without urge or passion, no call of love or answer, the voices simply murmuring away in a habit or death, their minds not on what they said, but blank or wandering or dreaming over their own lives. (28-9)

As if to compound the drabness of her life, Elizabeth dreams over her own life and realizes that her marriage was also based on an illusion. She believed "she could live for days in happiness" (42) in the small world of the village and barracks, but now she questions that belief:

> Had she married Reegan because she had been simply sick of living at the time and forced to create some illusion of happiness about him so that she might be able to go on? She'd no child of her own now. She'd achieved no intimacy with Reegan. . . . Did it matter where they went, whether one thing happened more than another? It seemed to matter less and less. . . . She couldn't ever hope to get any ordered vision on her life. Things were changing, going out of her control, grinding remorselessly forward with every passing moment. (42)

Elizabeth's realization that her dream of happiness in the village was based on an illusion forces her to see the reality of her situation, to see that she is trapped in a "withering" home and a "constricting" society; she feels "shut in a world of mere functional bodies: (63). McGahern adds further to the bleakness and darkness of Elizabeth's life by having her discover that she has cysts on her breasts. Believing that she has cancer and fearing impending death, Elizabeth tries to discover the purpose and meaning of her life—a life that is so seemingly hopeless.

In the reexamination of her life, Elizabeth reflects on the years she spent in London before her marriage to the sergeant. She remembers her relationship with a doctor, Halliday, whom "she had loved, and had counted no cost" (72). Yet Halliday ruined her dreams of love by admitting that he had used her "to get a short breather" (75). Elizabeth remembers that Halliday's confession "had destroyed her happiness. She'd never be able to live in a dream of happiness again" (76). And yet, as McGahern has pointed out, it was exactly that same dream of happiness and the idyllic life that led Elizabeth to rural Ireland; thus, the hopelessness of her situation seems only that much more bleak. As she continues to reflect on her past lover, Elizabeth remembers the rhetorical question often posed by Halliday: "What is all this living and dying anyway?" (71), a question that now carries more meaning for Elizabeth because of her illness, and thus, finding an answer to Halliday's question becomes Elizabeth's quest.

While Elizabeth searches for meaning in her life, her husband, Sergeant Reegan, searches for a way to rid himself of his overseer, Superintendent Quirke, whom he hates. Reegan, who once breathed the wild ideas of the Irish Free State,[4] has become bitter

4. Growing up "wild with ideals." (B 90) and fighting to preserve the peace of the Irish Free State, Reegan, a man born to lead, received petty promotions for his valor, but "there he stayed—to watch the Civil War and the years that followed in silent disgust" (B 91). Now in his job, Reegan obeys officers younger than himself, "he who had been in charge of ambushes before he was twenty" (B 91). While McGahern briefly mentions the Civil War in developing Reegan's character, it is interesting to note that one otherwise wouldn't know about the Civil War from reading his novels.

about his job since he sees no possibility of further advancement. Frustrated with his work and his self-important boss, Reegan becomes consumed by the desire to quit his job and take up farming since he is able to find some lifting of the gloom in working the land: "the frustrations and poisons of his life flowed into the clay he worked" (90). Even with Elizabeth's illness taking up most of the family savings, Reegan dreams of quitting his job, and thus, being free to start over. Driven by his own dream to make enough money to buy a farm, Reegan spends all of his spare time digging turf to be sold in town, and as a result, he puts further distance between himself and Elizabeth. Feeling all alone, the illness worsening, and failing thus far to find an answer to Halliday's question, Elizabeth feels, in a moment of desperation, that she should run outside and demand that Nature answer her question:

> She could run now, throw herself on the netting-wire, and call out across the lake to the woods where the saws still sung, "Oh answer me. Will Something answer me?" and she'd be met with echoes and real sounds of the saws and birds, cloud shadow on corrugations the wind had made on the water, and silence—the silence of the sky and lake and wood and people going about their lives. And if she was heard it could be only by people and what could they do? She'd look silly or gone crazy, she'd have broken the rules. She could only cause painful concern to those involved with her and wring ridicule and laughter from those who were not, the thing that runs counter to the fabricated structure of safe passions must be slaughtered out of existence. (159)

Elizabeth realizes that Nature cannot answer her question, and as she becomes confined to her bed with the darkness of death closing in, she comes to accept life as an incomprehensible mystery. Thus, Elizabeth ceases to ask for an answer to Halliday's question. She realizes that "nothing could be decided here; she was just passing through" (174). Elizabeth realizes that she will never understand life's mystery; yet in that apparent defeat of her quest, Elizabeth still praises life's mystery:

> All the apparent futility of her life in the barracks came at last to rest on this sense of mystery. And if the reality is this: We have no life but this one—she could only reflect and smile, it must have been the same before her birth and she doubted if she could have ever desired to be born. (174)

F. C. Molloy comments: "A moment of relief: no searching after explanations, being satisfied with the need to love, and letting life and death take their course. For Elizabeth the coming to terms with defeat is sufficient: no moment of revelation, no final insight into the mystery of being" (12).

For Elizabeth there is no vision; no final lifting of the darkness. And as he chants the rosary at her death, she "finds it hard enough to accept the reality of her situation; but it was surely the last and hardest thing to accept its interpretation from the knaves and active fools" (180) who would interpret her life for her. Thus, even at the moment of her death, McGahern's bleak vision continues to the end. And after Elizabeth's death, Reegan, becoming more and more dissatisfied with his job and the Superintendent, finally resigns from the force. Yet, McGahern points out that even Reegan's apparent victory over his Superintendent is only a shallow victory, if even a victory at all:

> He'd won and sold his turf, fulfilled all his contracts, but he hadn't near the money he'd expected to have, the expenses of her last illness and burial eating up most of the profit he had calculated on as well as all her savings, the savings that had meant so much to her now only a pathetic little sum against the flood of bills. (186)

At the close of the novel there is no lifting of the gloom; McGahern expresses no vision of hope for Reegan and his children:

> The night had come, the scarlets of the religious pictures faded, their glass glittered in the flashes of firelight and there seemed a red scattering of dust from the Sacred Heart lamp before the crib on the mantelpiece. (191)

There has not been any religious illuminosity; the religion that had lost its intensity at the opening of the novel is still dulled and faded. There also has not been any illuminosity from the land; all of Reegan's hard toiling is eaten up by the bill collectors. And just as the novel opened with Willie querying Elizabeth, it ends with his querying Reegan: "Is it time to light the lamp yet?" (191). Willie is once again fearful of the coming night. He watched his mother die of cancer, and he watched his father quit his job without having enough money saved to support the family. Willie realizes that he must find that illuminosity to lift the prevailing darkness before his life succumbs to the "withering constriction—the landscape of inhibition."

In *The Barracks,* then, McGahern has articulated the barren spiritual life of Ireland, a land where religious rituals and artifacts have lost their vitality. As a result, its people wither and die, questing for the light. They must, it seems, either leave Ireland or find a way to live with her.

In his second novel, *The Dark,* McGahern continues to "imagine Ireland as dark, dank, and dour" (O'Connell 255). Even the title of the novel emphasizes that the darkness that was so heavy in *The Barracks* has not yet been lifted. In this novel Willie, now named Mahoney, lives on a small rural farm with his father and two sisters. The focus of the novel is on the young adolescent's struggle to lift the darkness by freeing himself from his abusive father and the constricting farm while at the same time reaching some sort of reconciliation with his dead mother who wanted him to become a priest.

McGahern opens *The Dark* with a brutal confrontation between the protagonist and his father. The young Mahoney is accused of saying "fuck" and his father takes him upstairs to be whipped before his two sisters. The impression left by McGahern's opening scene is that the Mahoney family is one without compassion, understanding, or love. In one of his many attempts to win back his children's affections, the father takes his children fishing, but the day ends in disaster with him again yelling at his children. When night comes, the lonely and further alienated father climbs into bed with his son. The young Mahoney, pretending to be asleep, loathes his father's physical attention:

> There was no hope of sleep. . . . It was impossible to lie close. The loathing was too great. . . . Lunatic hatred rose choking against the restless sleeping bulk in the ball of blankets, the stupid bulk that had no care for anything except itself. (16-7)

Disgusted by his father, the young Mahoney realizes that he must find some vocation that will take him away from his father's clutches.

In chapter V, McGahern has the young Mahoney looking at a Memoriam card for his mother, and thus, remembering:

> On the road as I came with her from town loaded with parcels and the smell of tar in the heat I'd promised her that one day I'd say Mass for her. And all I did for her now was listen to my father's nagging and carry on private orgies of abuse. (26)

Remembering his dead mother's wish that he become a priest and his promise to say Mass for her, the young Mahoney considers a vocation to Holy Orders. The protagonist realizes that the priesthood would serve a dual purpose: it would reconcile him with his dead mother, as well as rid him of his father's domination. Although the young Mahoney dreams of becoming a priest, he knows from his compulsive masturbation and sexual fantasies that he cannot live a celibate life. Realizing that he cannot take Holy Orders and fulfill his promise to his mother, young Mahoney is devastated:

> I'd never be a priest. I was as well to be honest. I'd never be anything. It was certain. There was little to do but sit at the fire and stare out at the vacancy of my life at sixteen. (26)

F. C. Molloy comments that "the promise, the dream of saying Mass for his dead mother, is followed by an admission that he will never be anything. A temporary feeling of failure and frustration is understandable and in character for a sixteen-year-old boy, but McGahern, trying to emphasize again that pessimistic vision, goes further—the note of despair about the boy's future is an indication that McGahern has predetermined that he will fail" (14). The young Mahoney now guilt-ridden because he will be unable to keep his vow because of his self-abuse goes and confesses his sins. When the priest absolves him of his inquities, the young Mahoney is overwhelmed with joy. After confession, the protagonist's dream of becoming a priest is temporarily restored; he will be able to reconcile himself with his mother, and by doing so, lift the darkness that has pushed him into despair. However, the sexual urges continue and the masturbation again becomes a frequent habit. McGahern culminates the first part of the novel by having the "lost" Mahoney visit his uncle, Father Gerald, to see if he is really fit for the priesthood. During his first night at Father Gerald's house, the priest comes to the boy's bed and listens to his confession of sexual sins. Feeling close to the priest after his confession, young Mahoney asks the priest whether he also had to fight sexual temptation in his youth. The priest completely ignores the question and Mahoney feels bitter and hurt; he realizes that it is all done, he will never become a priest. At this point in the novel McGahern's tone of despair is again evident. The boy feels destined to fail; he will not become a priest; he will not say Mass for his mother; he will not escape his father's clutches nor his father's farm; he will live out a life of despair in the dark land of inhibition.

In the second part of the novel the protagonist, having rejected the priesthood, searches for another avenue of escape and soon becomes involved in studying for a university scholarship.

Mahoney hopes that by winning the scholarship he will finally be able to escape from his father and the drudgery of the farm. For a whole year, against his father's wishes, young Mahoney crams in preparation for university examination. On the eve of the examination he realizes the "banality of the whole situation" (104).

> It was impossible not to laugh too, it was too comic, the whole affair exaggerated, I was going to no crucifixion on a mountain between thieves but to a desk in a public building to engage in a writing competition. The whole business had grown out of proportion. . . . I was at the heart of the absurdity and what proportion was there to my life, what did I know about it. I knew nothing. (104)

Mahoney takes the examination, and while he waits for the results, he helps his father on the farm. Exerting physical strength, Mahoney finds "there was a strange delight in this power and animal strength" (110). Although Mahoney finds happiness and satisfaction in his work on the farm, his dream is of the university, and thus, the hint of light emitted by the land goes unnoticed. (A preindication that McGahern's protagonist must finally return to the land for the needed illuminosity, and thus, also an indication that the university will not aid Mahoney in lifting the darkness from his life, nor will teaching aid the protagonist in *The Leavetaking*). Molloy comments: "The light has temporarily broken through, but 'the dark' soon closes in again" (17).

In August, Mahoney receives word that he has won the scholarship to the university. Finally able to leave his constricting environment, Mahoney goes to the university in Galway. However, at Galway Mahoney is unhappy. The reality of university life is not what he had dreamed it to be. He realizes that the scholarship funds will not last long enough for him to enter medicine, and he does not wish to pursue science; thus, his doubts grow. McGahern crushes the boy's dream further when at a lecture he is falsely accused of "hooliganism" and is asked to leave the hall. Wallowing in self-pity at his shattered dreams and meaningless life, Mahoney, after consulting with his father, decides to leave the university and to seek work as a clerk for the Electrical Supply Board (E.S.B.) in Dublin.

> You could go to the E.S.B. If it was no use you could leave again, and it didn't matter. . . . You could laugh purely, without bitterness, for the first time and it was a kind of happiness, at its heart the terror of an unclear recognition of the reality that set you free, touching you with as much foreboding as the sodden leaves falling in this day, or any cliche. (139-40)

Feeling that life is nothing more than a direction, that any road is as good as another, Mahoney thinks that he is finally free, and as the novel ends, Mahoney and his father reconcile; Mahoney tells him: "I wouldn't have been brought up any other way or by any other father" (142). While Mahoney feels the darkness lifting, McGahern does not leave the reader with that same impression. Mahoney, like Elizabeth in *The Barracks,* has not fulfilled his dreams: in his specific case, he has not said Mass for his mother, nor has he escaped his father, or the "landscape of inhibition." As O'Connell points out: "the boy will be paralyzed in the civil service, an Irish purgatory" (261). Thus, McGahern's vision is still unrelieved; the darkness confronting his protagonist has not been lifted—Ireland is still a prison from which there seems little hope of escape.

In his third novel, *The Leavetaking,* McGahern's protagonist, now named Patrick Moran, is still trapped by the "withering constriction" of Irish society. Still guilt-ridden over his failure to say Mass for his own mother, Patrick attempts a symbolic reconciliation by first following in his mother's footsteps and becoming a teacher, and secondly by finding and then proposing marriage to a woman who conforms to his mother's image. However, the woman does not love him and the relationship ends in failure. Finding that he cannot reconcile himself with his mother, Patrick, wanting to escape the memory of his mother that now haunts him like a second shadow, flees to London where he meets and eventually marries an American woman, Isobel. Upon returning to Ireland to resume his teaching duties, Patrick is asked to resign from his job because of his marriage outside of the church. Refusing to resign, Patrick is dismissed from his teaching position. Rejecting his mother, his past, and his country, Patrick decides to return to London, and thus at the close of the novel he has not fulfilled his promise to his mother, nor has he lifted the prevailing darkness that hovers over the land; he simply has fled from it.

The novel opens and closes on the same day, the day of Patrick's dismissal from the school. The body of the novel contains Patrick's memories of the events leading up to that day. His first memory is of his mother. As the recollection continues, Patrick remembers his mother's dream that he would become a priest, a dream that Patrick has been unable to realize:

> The dream never changed. She would go in a black car to my ordination. It would have no white ribbons or virginal flowers but it would be fulfillment of her wedding day. She'd kneel for the first blessing from my

> priest's hands when they'd taken the bandages off, hands fragrant with sweet oils. (28)

Moving out of his recollection and back to reality in the schoolroom, Patrick finds himself disgusted by the memories of his mother; his unfulfilled promise; his lost and meaningless life in rural Ireland.

> In the schoolroom of this day I am disgusted at the memory. Though who am I to judge or to expect her frail person to break the link against the need of the chain to lengthen and grow strong in normal darkness. (28)

Disgusted not only by the memories of his past but also by the aridity and confinement of the classroom, Patrick "tires of the cruelty of the [children's] play, and turns back to his own life" (45). He recalls his mother's odd courtship and eventual marriage to a cruel and harsh police sergeant. Even though he found his father unloving, Patrick remembers his mother's character: her warmth, tenderness, gentleness, and the loving relationship that he developed with her. Yet as he thinks on the loving relationship he had with his mother, his memory again focuses on his mother's dream of his becoming a priest.

> My mother's dream for my life, the way that life happened down to the schoolroom of this day, my memory of it and the memory of her dream, and so the tide is full, and turns out to her life; and what a coffin this schoolroom would be without the long withdrawing tide of memory becoming imagination. (45)

As the reverie continues, Patrick vividly remembers his mother's death—the death that has caused so much guilt for him over the years. He remembers his father ordering the house cleared and the furniture moved to the barracks, thus leaving his wife to "die alone with the nurses" (69). As the house is being emptied and the beds are hammered apart, Patrick remembers going to his dying mother's room:

> I came to say goodbye, mother; the priest had a hand on my shoulder as I bent to kiss her, and as lips touched everything was burned away except that I had to leave at once. If I stayed one moment longer I was lost. Panic was growing: to put arms about the leg of the bed so that they'd not be able to drag me away, to stay by that bed forever. (71)

Later, after the news of his mother's death reaches the barracks, Patrick remembers his remorse and guilt:

> O but if only I could have had back then that whole hour I had wasted down with the lorry on the cinders so that I could see her stir or smile. I would portion the hour out so that I would see her forever. She must have felt that I too had abandoned her in the emptying of the house and the horrible beating apart of the iron. Not one moment of that hour could be given back and it was fixed forever that I would not watch with her while the house was being emptied. I had not loved her enough. (75)

As the first part of the novel closes, Patrick realizes that his guilt over his mother's death has settled on him like a shadow and that it will continue to follow him, making his life in rural Ireland bleak and dark, until he finds release.

In part two of the novel, one is again made aware of the protagonist's past and of his desire to understand it before he leaves it for good. The opening scene is another one of memory; Patrick's focus is again on his mother's death and his failed promise to say mass for her.

> Through the sacrifice of my life to the priesthood I'd redeem the betrayal of her in that upstairs room. For years I promised it to her memory that, "One day I'd say Mass for her." I'd lift the chalice in anointed hands on the altar and in the lonely rooms of presbyteries I'd be faithful to her. (85)

Yet Patrick, as McGahern's protagonist has already confessed in *The Dark*, cannot give up his longing "to enter the mystery of the lovely and living flesh of women" (85). Therefore, in a symbolic attempt at reconciliation with his mother, Patrick chooses his mother's profession of teaching.

> But when the time arrived for me to make that sacrifice I failed her once again. I wasn't able to renounce the longing to enter the mystery of the lovely and living flesh of women, and out of guilt I chose second best. I followed her footsteps to the Training College. In some country school I'd teach out my days. If I was lucky I'd find a girl lovely as she was whom I'd love and live with in the heart of the country. It seems all far away from this last day in the classroom: a confused child's world of guilty dreaming. (85)

Hoping not only to reconcile himself with his mother by following in her profession, Patrick also tries to find a woman most like her to marry and live with in the Irish countryside. At a dance he meets and falls in love with a country girl who is studying to be a teacher—a woman most like his mother. However, she rejects his proposal of marriage because she does not love him, and thus, Patrick discovers "that the shadow that had fallen so long from the dead now fell from her young life" (91). As Molloy comments:

"Patrick flees from this shadow and later considers that the deaths of his mother and his 'country dream' are related to his own imagining of death" (24).

Attempting to escape the shadow of his mother that continually haunts him in the dark Irish countryside, Patrick, in one of the many leavetakings in the novel, takes a year's leave of absence and travels to England. While in England, Patrick meets and subsequently falls in love with Isobel, a young American divorcee. Because of his love for Isobel, Patrick finally feels the shadow of death receding, the guilt over his mother lifting. They marry in a registry office and return to Ireland so that Patrick can resume his teaching duties. However, Patrick cannot reveal his marriage because it will mean the loss of his job since he married outside of the church.

> I explained how there were two salary scales for teachers in Ireland: one for women and single men, and a higher for married men. If I applied to go on the higher scale they'd discover I wasn't properly married. If I remained on the single, which I'd have to do, they'd find out sooner or later in such a small city that I was living as a married man but not married. Either way I was certain to be fired. (161)

Eventually, the school headmaster does learn of the marriage and he asks Patrick to resign. Patrick refuses to resign from his post. O'Connell comments that "Patrick's stage-managed dismissal is his final act of exorcising Ireland. He sets up a situation in which he is forced to choose between his country and his love and, of course, chooses his love at the willing price of exile" (263). On the eve of his dismissal, Patrick observes that "the gull's shadows will not float this evening on the concrete" (180). Patrick finally feels free. His marriage to Isobel, his subsequent dismissal, and his future exile all aid in finally lifting the darkness from his life. The shadow of his mother no longer hovers over him. By taking Isobel as his wife, he has rejected everything his mother had wished for him: he rejected the priesthood; he rejected his teaching at a rural Irish Catholic school; he rejected Ireland. He will never say Mass for his mother; a reconciliation cannot take place.

After receiving his letter of dismissal, Patrick reflects on his new found freedom, and on a past that he has now rejected:

> In the rain of the street I finger the letter I forced them to give me and wonder was it worth it, and the answer that comes is probably not, and then I think the same answer belongs to all my life. . . . I hear the beating apart of the iron beds with the priest by her head on the pillow. In the laurels I follow her coffin on the last journey and think of her dreams for me. . . . I see the priest addressing us again as we prepared to leave the Training College, trained to teach the young, the Second Priesthood, and this evening it all seems strewn about my life as a waste, and it too had belonged once in rude confidence to a day. (193)

Heading home to his wife, Patrick reflects on the leavetaking that will occur in the morning; the road that will lead him and his love away from "the landscape of inhibition:"

> My love waits for me in a room at Howth. Tomorrow we will go on the boat to London. It will be neither a return or a departure but a continuing. (193)

While some critics view Patrick's leavetaking as "a lifting of the gloom" (Molloy 26), McGahern does not leave this reader with that same impression. McGahern's protagonist has not lifted the darkness from the "landscape of inhibition;" he simply has fled from it. Feeling, like the younger protagonist in *The Dark,* that life is nothing more than a direction, a continuing, Patrick has not risen above the Irish aridity and confinement. His life, like Elizabeth's and Mahoney's, is one of unfulfilled dreams: he has not said Mass for his mother; instead, he has only fled from her shadow and memory. Jonathan Raban comments:

> *The Leavetaking* asserts a quite opposite truth: that only by leaving can life begin. Its moral force is all directed towards exile; but its style stays stubbornly at home, refusing to budge from the landscape out of which it has grown. . . . *The Leavetaking* eventually turns itself inside-out. . . . McGahern reveals that leave, however much it may be ached for, cannot be taken. (78-9)

And as one of McGahern's minor characters asserts in the novel: "I suppose deep down everybody loves his own country no matter how bleeding awful it is" (161). Thus, if McGahern's vision is to be resolved, Patrick must remain In Ireland and search for the illuminosity that will lift the darkness. However, Patrick flees from his responsibility to his mother, and thus, his country. And while his leavetaking may temporarily lift the shadows from his own life, McGahern's vision is still unrelieved; Ireland is still imagined as a world lost.

In his fourth and latest novel, *The Pornographer,* McGahern's vision becomes more optimistic. Irish society which had been bleak, dark, and constricting in the earlier novels takes on a brighter, more hopeful hue. In the novel, after a series of

compounding events, McGahern's protagonist begins to realize that he has not acted properly in his life. He has not accepted responsibility for his actions, actions that have left many people hurt. Realizing for the first time that one road is not as good as any other, McGahern's protagonist decides to follow one road, a road that leads him back to the Irish countryside, the countryside that the younger protagonist in the earlier novels could not wait to leave. Returning to the countryside, the protagonist decides to propose marriage to an Irish Catholic farm girl—a woman most like his mother—and he decides to try and make a go of it on his inherited farm. Thus, McGahern's vision has come full circle; he has finally allowed his protagonist possible happiness in Ireland. By deciding to make a go of it in the Irish countryside with a woman most like his mother, McGahern's protagonist has finally lifted the darkness from "the landscape of inhibition;" the symbolic Mass for "her" has finally taken place.

In *The Pornographer,* the protagonist, a former school-teacher, now lives in contemporary Dublin where he is a writer of purportless pornography. Attempting to get over the pain of a lost love, the writer fills his meaningless days by writing about the inexhaustible sexual appetites of Mavis and Colonel Grimshaw, by going to the hospital to visit his dying aunt, by frequenting local pubs to meet with his publisher, Maloney, and by hoping to satisfy his own sexual appetite. One night at a pub he meets a woman, Josephine, and they quickly become lovers. Josephine refuses to use contraceptives because she thinks they are unnatural; the protagonist does not care enough to see that protection of some kind is used, and as a result of their foolishness, she becomes pregnant. Wishing to make the pregnancy legitimate, Josephine proposes marriage; however, McGahern's protagonist refuses; he only wants the problem removed, and thus, he asks her to have an abortion. The protagonist's unwillingness to marry and Josephine's unwillingness to have an abortion leave her with little choice but to go to London to have the baby. Feeling disillusioned by the pregnancy, the protagonist searches for some meaning:

> We have to inland, in the solitude that is both pain and joy, and there make out own truth. . . . All the doctrines that we had learned by heart and could not understand and fretted over became laughingly clear. To find we had to lose: the road away became the road back. . . . (202)

While Josephine is on the road away to London, the protagonist's road continues to lead him to the hospital to visit his dying aunt. During these visits he happens to meet Nurse Brady, a dark-haired Irish Catholic farm girl. (The description of Nurse Brady is the same as the description of the protagonist's mother and first love in *The Leavetaking).* Disregarding any responsibility to Josephine, the protagonist pursues Nurse Brady, and eventually his frequent meetings with her lead to their making love, a love he associates with "the sweet fragrance of the new hay" (175). After further meetings with Nurse Brady, the protagonist realizes that he is beginning to fall in love with her. However, in what is the first sign of his understanding of how badly he has acted in his life, the protagonist decides it is better to wait on their relationship until he is free of his (now realized) responsibility to Josephine.

After the baby is born, the protagonist goes to London to accept his responsibility to Josephine, but he refuses to accept any responsibility for the baby. McGahern leaves one with the impression that his protagonist's growth into understanding is still, at this juncture, very shallow. As a result of his abandonment of the baby, the protagonist is beaten by a friend of Josephine's. The beating brings the protagonist, although now battered and scarred, to a fuller awareness of how badly he has acted in his life. He realizes that life is not simply a continuing, that one road is not as good as any other:

> I felt the cold and it was painful to move my lips and my face seemed numb, one eye was closed; and I was extraordinarily happy, the whole night and its lights and sounds passing in an amazing clarity that was yet completely calm, as if a beautiful incision had been made that separated me from the world and still left me at pure ease in its still centre. (229)

Cut, bruised, and yet calm with understanding, the protagonist returns home from London only to find that his aunt has died. Going to her funeral takes the protagonist on a road back to the Irish countryside of his youth. While there, his uncle shows him his newly bought farmhouse. The protagonist remarks that the house has a "solid hall door looking confidently down on the road" (233). Once again the image of the road has become important to McGahern's protagonist since he now believes that he has finally found his own road to travel. The sound beating he received in London has finally made him realize how badly he has acted, that life cannot be a series of continual leavetakings from his problems. He now understands that he must finally stand and accept responsibility for his actions, and thus, he makes a decision about his life: "I'm going to try and make a go of it" (251). Reflecting on what his life has been, the protagonist sums up his loathsome past:

> By not attending, by thinking any one thing was as worth doing as any other, by sleeping with anybody who'd agree I had been the cause of as much pain and confusion and evil as if I had actively set out to do it. I had not attended properly. I had found the energy to choose too painful. Broken in love, I had turned back, let the light of imagination almost out. (251)

Realizing that he has not attended properly, that he has lived a life of darkness, McGahern's protagonist realizes the need to follow not any road, but the road that is true—the road that leads back to the rural Irish countryside of his youth.

> We had to leave the road of reason because we needed to go farther. Not to have a reason is a greater reason still to follow the instinct for the true, to follow it with all force we have, in all the seeing and the final blindness. (251-2)

Believing that he has now found the true road for his life, the protagonist finds himself feeling that he needs to pray:

> What I wanted to say was that I had a fierce need to pray, for myself, Maloney, my uncle, the girl, the whole shoot. The prayers could not be answered, but prayers that cannot be answered need to be the more completely said, being their own beginning as well as end. (252)

The novel, thus, ends on a triumphant note; the protagonist has decided to return to the Irish countryside and make a go of it. He will propose marriage to Nurse Brady—a woman most like his mother, and he will return to the farm that he inherited from his father. As the novel closes and the rain starts pouring down on McGahern's protagonist and on his Ireland, one cannot help but feel a baptism is taking place—the darkness, shadows, and guilt are finally being lifted from "the landscape of inhibition." McGahern has finally allowed his protagonist a chance at happiness in the Irish countryside. The Mass he so longed to say for "her" has finally taken place—McGahern's vision is resolved.

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