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## *Female and Male Perspectives on Growing Up Irish in Edna O'Brien, John McGahern and Brian Moore*

by JAMES M. CAHALAN

WHAT WAS IT LIKE growing up in Ireland in the 1940's, according to contemporary Irish novelists who have sought to recapture the experience? Part of the answer may be found by examining Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* (1960) and its sequels, *The Lonely Girls* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964); John McGahern's *The Dark* (1965); and Brian Moore's *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1965). These are among the most popular novels and the most celebrated bildungsromans of the early 1960's. They were all published within a single five-year period and went a long way toward setting the tone of contemporary Irish fiction in general, especially since they were early novels by writers with long, ongoing, prodigious and influential careers.

Here I am interested in reassessing these novels as part of the subgenre of the Irish bildungsroman and in terms of their sharp gender differences. Critics have tended to treat McGahern and Moore in superficially neutral terms as simply "novelists" or "Irish novelists," while more readily foregrounding O'Brien's status as a "woman novelist." I want to examine gender issues in all three of these novelists, both female and male. After the following introduction situating all three in critical and historical contexts, in the body of this essay I then discuss O'Brien, McGahern and Moore in sequence, pursuing a number of comparisons and contrasts in each section as well as in my conclusion.

While each of these novelists has attracted a number of insightful articles, each has had to suffer critical neglect not only in the broader literary canon (in which most Irish writers beyond Yeats and Joyce are neglected), but even in the standard surveys of Irish literature itself.<sup>1</sup> This is true even though each of these three writers has been described as among the most successful contemporary Irish novelists, with either Moore or McGahern often evaluated as the best. C oil n Owens's claim for McGahern is not unusual among critical pronouncements about these writers: "McGahern's reputation as the leading Irish novelist

1. Neither Seamus Deane in his *Short History of Irish Literature* (1986) nor A. Norman Jeffares in *Anglo-Irish Literature* (1982) even mention Edna O'Brien, with Jeffares also omitting McGahern altogether and Deane failing to refer to *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*. In their *Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature* (1982), Roger McHugh and Maurice Harmon do mention each of these three novelists, but they do not discuss any of O'Brien's novels, nor do they cite *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*. Neither the limitations of space nor the date of publication provide an adequate excuse, since in a survey published earlier than any of those mentioned, and less than a quarter of the length of any of them, *Anglo-Irish Literature* (1980), Augustine Martin managed to include astute if brief comments on each of the novels under consideration here. See my own *The Irish Novel: A Critical History* for overviews of O'Brien (pp. 285-89), McGahern (271-75), and Moore (266-71).

is sure" (400). Yet these three leading Irish novelists have attracted a total of only five critical books to date.<sup>2</sup>

These novels also lend themselves to close comparison and contrast because they all deal largely with the same historical period in Ireland, the repressive 1940's, as examined by three authors born within a dozen or so years of each other. Moore was born in 1921, O'Brien in 1930, and McGahern in 1934. The 1940's was a time when such innocent classics as Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (1941) and Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty* (1942) were banned, when reading the Senate debate over Cross's delightful book was, Frank O'Connor recalled, "like a long, slow swim through a sewage bed."<sup>3</sup> Mervyn Wall satirized this period accurately and mercilessly in *The Return of Fursey* (1948). This novel includes an Irish Censor with two independently moving eyes—one to focus on the "dirty" words and one to read everything else—who rules that the Old Testament is, in the Censorship Board's infamous and recurrent phrase, "in general tendency indecent."

Irish censorship seemed to ease up after the 1940's. The early 1960's were marked by increasing liberalization of many aspects of an unusually backward Irish social life, with Taoiseach Sean Lemass's administration (1959-66) often regarded as pivotal. Terence Brown asserts that "Irishmen and women believe now, as they believed then, that those five years [between 1958 and 1963] represented a major turning point in Irish fortunes" (241). Such new attitudes helped encourage O'Brien, McGahern and Moore to write their bold new novels. But then the hoary hand of Irish censorship, a conservative force with impressive staying power, banned O'Brien and McGahern, with the latter losing his teaching job in the controversy over *The Dark*.<sup>4</sup> Both writers left Dublin in the same period and went into Joycean exile in England. Brian Moore had emigrated to Canada in 1948.

O'Brien's *The Country Girls* and McGahern's *The Dark* offer female and male versions of strikingly similar upbringings at the hands of alcoholic, abusive fathers in rural and small-town Ireland—O'Brien's County Clare and McGahern's County Roscommon. As a novel about a middle-class youth in Belfast during World War II, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* offers a different perspective, yet is quite similar to *The Dark* in its male preoccupations. It should also be noted that each of these novels follows a fairly traditional realistic form, though *The Dark*, with its shifting narrative point of view, includes a somewhat ironic undercurrent. Each of these novelists went on to write more experimental kinds of novels:

2. McGahern and O'Brien have each attracted only one critical book. Grace Eckley's short monograph on O'Brien is twenty years old. The first critical book on McGahern, Denis Sampson's, appeared only in 1993. If one counts Jeanne Flood's short 1974 survey in the same Bucknell series as Eckley's, there are three critical books on Moore. Hallvard Dahlie published two editions of his book on Moore as listed. Jo O'Donoghue's is the most recent book on Moore. Part of Kerry McSweeney's book is devoted to Moore, and David Rees's bibliography includes McGahern and Moore. I want to add a special note of thanks to Patricia Kane, my graduate assistant as well as a participant in my fall 1993 seminar on the twentieth-century bildungsroman, who helped me track down these sources and a great many others that I cite in this essay.

3. See my article, "Tailor Tim Buckley: Folklore, Literature and *Seanchas an Táilliúra*," in which O'Connor's remark is cited from the 1942 Senate proceedings (116, n.3).

4. Julia Carlson, *Banned in Ireland* (Athen, Ga: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1990) contains interviews with McGahern (53-67), O'Brien (69-79) and Moore (109-121) on the subject.

for example, O'Brien's *Night* (1972), McGahern's *The Pornographer* (1979), and Moore's *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975). In their autobiographical bildungsromans, however, they sought to recount their coming of age as realistically as possible. In doing so, they go some way to disproving Weldon Thornton's unfounded assertion that "in more recent decades, since World War II, interest in the *Bildungsroman* has waned" (69).

For Irish as well as other novelists, the most influential modern bildungsroman is, of course, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But in an essay addressing gender differences, it seems appropriate to add a second important model and precursor: Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*. This work has gained increasing critical appreciation in recent years as an important mid-century feminist model for contemporary Irish women writers. Ludicrously banned because of a single sentence referring obliquely to Helen Archer's father's homosexual relationship, *The Land of Spices* examines the friendship that develops between Helen, mother superior of an Irish convent, and Anna Murphy, a young student in the convent school. In general, this novel compellingly explores the parallel growth of Helen and Anna, with each learning from and supporting the other. It employs a realistic style, an often epistolary framework, and an ending in which young Anna goes off to Dublin to find her way in the world. *The Land of Spices* is thus closer to the classic form of the traditional bildungsroman than *A Portrait* is.

Considered together, these two novels provide a bipolar model: male versus female. McGahern's *The Dark* and Moore's *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* both expose male protagonists who are unable to relate meaningfully to women, and end with their reconciliation with their fathers. In contrast, Edna O'Brien's entire *Country Girls Trilogy* is devoted to Caithleen Brady and Baba Brennan, best friends and double protagonists. These novelists refer to Joyce as a key influence, but their novels, like *The Land of Spices*, are more realistic than *A Portrait* in form and style, and end in the traditional setting of the big city. While Stephen Dedalus leaves Dublin for the Continent, the protagonists of Kate O'Brien, Edna O'Brien and John McGahern all go to Dublin—and then on to London, in *The Country Girls Trilogy*—to make their way in the world, while Brian Moore's Gavin Burke is determined to stay in Belfast even (or especially) in the midst of the German bombing of the city.

Nevertheless, Edna O'Brien, McGahern and Moore are very self-conscious about Joyce. O'Brien reports that T.S. Eliot's *Introducing James Joyce* was "the first book I ever bought" (Guppy, 29), while Moore admits that *Ulysses* "was the only book I ever stole—my cousin never got it back" (Sale, 71). Joyce made O'Brien "realize that I wanted literature for the rest of my life" (Guppy, 29); moreover, "reading bits of Joyce was the first time in my whole life that I happened on something in a book that was exactly like my own life" (quoted in Eckley, 25-26). Philip Roth reports O'Brien as having told him that, "In the constellation of geniuses, he is a blinding light and the father of us all" ("Edna O'Brien," 39). It is, therefore, not surprising to find many Joycean traces in her fiction. Fritz Senn has noted the clear echoes of the final passages of "The Dead" in the following from *The Country Girls*:

We drove along the Limerick road and while we were driving it began to snow. Softly the flakes fell. Softly and obliquely against the windscreen. It fell on the hedges and on the trees behind the hedges, and on the treeless fields in the distance, and slowly and quietly it changed the colour and shape of things, until everything outside the motor car had a mantle of white soft down.

Later O'Brien novels—*A Pagan Place* (1970) and *Night* (1972)—also reveal a strong Joyce influence, the latter, in particular, deriving from the “Penelope” section of *Ulysses*.

Both McGahern and Moore are on record as embracing the realist rather than the experimental side of Joyce. In an essay on *Dubliners*, McGahern quotes extensively from a debate between George Sand and Gustave Flaubert, siding with Flaubert and his insistence on being a realist, tied to the ground. Moore has similarly stated that, “I agree with Joyce; he said, ‘All my work is the celebration of the commonplace’” (Sale, 72). Moore has indicated that for him Joyce was a “tremendous influence” and that *A Portrait* “seems to me, as it does to almost every Irish writer, even today, almost the story of one’s early life. It’s our generation’s *Catcher in the Rye*: our *Huck Finn*—all those things. The retreats, the hellfire, the feeling of hopelessness with girls” (quoted in McSweeney, “Brian Moore,” 55). And Moore has continued to reiterate that “Joyce remains our mentor: he who helped us fly past those nets of home, fatherland and church, who taught us the rebel cry of *non serviam*” (quoted in O’Donoghue, 28). Interestingly, as early as 1962, Brian Moore was assessed by at least one critic as “probably, at this stage of things literary, the writer best fit to be Joyce’s heir” (Ludwig, 5).

My sense of male versus female aspects of the novels considered here is complicated by the fact that Moore and McGahern are both cognizant of and interested in women’s problems, while Edna O’Brien is not easily pigeonholed in feminist terms. Moore and McGahern both began their careers with powerful, sympathetic novels about women as victims—Moore’s *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955) and McGahern’s *The Barracks* (1963)—and they have often returned to this preoccupation, Moore notably in *I Am Mary Dunne* (1968) and McGahern in *Amongst Women* (1990). Writing sympathetically about women does not necessarily make a man a feminist. Yet McGahern writes in a fairly recent essay: “I think that women fared worst of all within this paternalistic mishmash” (“Me Among the Protestants,” 27).

Edna O’Brien is arguably the pioneer of the current generation of women writing about Irish women’s struggles. But she has commented that, “A lot of things have been said by feminists about equality, about liberation, but not all of these things are gospel truth. . . . I am not the darling of the feminists. They think I am too preoccupied with old-fashioned themes like love and longing” (Guppy, 33). Many feminists are themselves critical of essentialist notions that all women’s experiences are the same, or that “women” and “men” are clear categories. For example, Hélène Cixous, writing about *A Portrait*, declares: “I reproach myself for using the words *men* and *women*. We have difficulties nowadays with these words. . . . Maybe a man would have had something to say about female or ‘feminine’ writing, or vice versa. . . . Please use as many

quotation marks as you need to avoid taking these terms too literally" (1). "Male" and "female" are certainly not terms to be discarded, however; they constantly impress themselves upon us in the novels examined here. We can read them in the spirit of Cixous: "what I am interested in is the libidinal education of the artist" as "determined particularly by sexual difference" (2).

\* \* \*

POPULAR AND CRITICAL responses to Edna O'Brien's work have not taken us very far toward understanding her central artistic vision. As Raymonde Popot notes, Edna O'Brien's frequent bannings "invite some doubtful curiosity fostered now by the paperback edition[s] and [their] advertising" (255), and critics have pointed out O'Brien's sharp country insights, evident in such descriptions as, "the pinkness of his skin reminded me of young pigs at home" (*The Country Girls*, 191). Darcy O'Brien has pointed out that she was "the first country girl to write of this experience and to make her own kind of poetry of it, and the bravery of the accomplishment ought not to be slighted" (183), adding that, "Even in her mature years she continues to see herself as the country girl, equal to the challenge of the city but much abused by it" (185). Such statements, however, only skim the surface of O'Brien's work.

Edna O'Brien has been openly obsessed with childhood—"that trenchant childhood route," she calls it at the end of her significantly entitled memoir, *Mother Ireland* (1976), where she concludes that she still wants to make "the leap that would restore one to one's original place and state of consciousness, to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth" (144). "It's amazing," she has indicated, that "childhood really occupies at most twelve years of our early life . . . and the bulk of the rest of our lives is shadowed or coloured by that time" (quoted in Darcy O'Brien, 179). To Philip Roth, she said: "The time when you are most alive and most aware is in childhood and one is trying to recapture that heightened awareness" ("Edna O'Brien," 39).

The final three chapter titles in O'Brien's *Mother Ireland* could just as well be the titles of the three parts of *The Country Girls Trilogy*: "A Convent," "Dublin's Fair City," and "Escape to England." When she leaves the semi-Gaelic, rural Irish world of County Clare for Dublin (and then London), O'Brien's Caitheleen Brady significantly becomes "Kate" (the clipped, more thoroughly Anglicized version of her name). *The Country Girls* (which might be termed the author's "bildungsroman proper," given its spotlight on Caitheleen's adolescence) and its sequels take us from the early 1940's through the end of the 1950's. The novel follows Caitheleen and her best friend, Baba, from their homes to a convent boarding-school, from which they get expelled, and then to Dublin, where they go to work. In *The Lonely Girl*, both of them end up in London, with Caitheleen/Kate moving into and out of a relationship with Eugene Gaillard. She marries him in *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, they have a son, and then she loses both of them—while Baba marries a building contractor for his money. The movement in these three novels is toward increasing exile, loneliness, and loss.

Irish fathers' alcoholism and physical and sexual abuse are central problems

in both *The Country Girls Trilogy* and *The Dark* that need to be exposed in order to understand these novels (and others that confront such common realities). Caitheleen Brady's life is forever marked by her alcoholic, abusive father and by her victimized mother, who drowns early in *The Country Girls*. The entire *Country Girls Trilogy* begins and ends with her father. *The Country Girls* begins as follows:

I wakened quickly and sat up in bed abruptly. It is only when I am anxious that I waken easily and for a minute I did not know why my heart was beating faster than usual. Then I remembered. The old reason. He had not come home. (3)<sup>5</sup>

In the 1986 epilogue to the trilogy's collected edition, Baba, contemplating Kate's probable suicide, declares: "Father—the crux of her dilemma" (531). O'Brien has commented that her own father "was what you might call the 'archetypal' Irishman—a gambler, drinker, a man totally unequipped to be a husband or a father" (Guppy, 38). As Baba puts it in the sardonically entitled *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, "An Irishman: good at battles, sieges, and massacres. Bad in bed" (384). Indeed, Caitheleen's father is only the first in a series of men—including Mr. Gentleman, Jack Holland, and Eugene Gaillard—who abuse her. She marries Eugene over her father's protestations, but Eugene ends up striking her (406) and taking their son away from her.

For Caitheleen, her mother is "everything to her" (6), and she could never get over the "commonplace sacrifice of her life" (203). Her two greatest early fears are that she will lose her mother and Hickey, their farmhand and the closest thing to a substitute father-figure for her (29). She loses both of them. Concerning her own mother, O'Brien told Roth, "I loved her, overloved her, yet she visited a different legacy on me [than her father], an all-embracing guilt. I still have a sense of her over my shoulder, judging" ("Edna O'Brien," 39). We need not look far for a psychoanalytic critique that can help us to understand such relationships, for O'Brien advanced her own to Roth: "If you want to know what I regard as the principal crux of female despair, it is this: in the Greek myth of Oedipus and in Freud's exploration of it, the son's desire for his mother is admitted; the infant daughter also desires its mother but it is unthinkable, either in myth, in fantasy or in fact, that that desire can be consummated" ("Edna O'Brien," 39-40). James Haule speaks of O'Brien's "desire to be her own mother" (217).

Psychoanalytic and feminist social theorists can help us understand O'Brien and her protagonists. Colette Dowling writes in *The Cinderella Complex*: "Personal, psychological dependency—the deep wish to be taken care of by others—is the chief force holding women down today. . . . Like Cinderella, women today," typically obsessed with their fathers and husbands, "are still

5. Peggy O'Brien's claim that Caitheleen's father is a man "from whom escape would be easy" (486) is misdirected. He pursues Caitheleen to Dublin, and even physical escape from him is no guarantee against the patriarchal world that he has done much to create for Caitheleen.

waiting for something external to transform their lives" (21).<sup>6</sup> As Tamsin Hargreaves argues, "O'Brien's early writing painfully articulates this fundamental problem of loss of self. . . . Because this psychological umbilical cord between mother and child leaves Caithleen weak and dependent, she is, upon her mother's death, stranded at an infantile emotional level and condemned to carry a painful sense of loss and need throughout her life" (291). Hargreaves aptly describes O'Brien's novels as "finely written psychodramas in which the protagonists desperately attempt to replace the safety and wholeness, the sense of identity and meaning found with the mother" (291-99). Cixous notes that while Stephen Dedalus can appropriate his early guilt and externalize it as part of his male artistic vision, for a woman guilt too often becomes internalized and destructive. "'If what I think is good is bad, then I am the bad one.' And that's the way women usually act" (12). This pattern is very evident in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, and becomes additionally clear from a comparison between it and *The Dark* and *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*.

While some feminists have criticized Edna O'Brien for not being a sufficiently liberated feminist because she writes about women obsessed with and victimized by their relationships with men, her trilogy nevertheless can certainly be read as a strongly feminist text, especially in its thoroughgoing attention to women's internalization of victimization, as critiqued by Cixous. We also find moments of publicly stated feminism in the trilogy. Just one example among many is the episode in *Girls in Their Married Bliss* in which Kate learns that Eugene has taken their son out of the country without telling her, and is informed by the authorities that "a mother's signature was not necessary" (504) on her son's passport. "'You call that just,' she said" (504). Throughout her fiction, O'Brien consistently deals with women on their own terms, uncovering the female world. As O'Brien herself has stated: "One woman in *Ms.* magazine pointed out that I send bulletins from battle fronts where other women do not go. I think I do" (Guppy, 34).

O'Brien becomes increasingly critical of Kate's plight, choosing in *Girls in Their Married Bliss* and the epilogue to switch the narrator to Baba, who is a much tougher feminist alternative to Caithleen/Kate throughout the trilogy. Kate's self-sterilization was added to the revised edition of *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1967), and O'Brien then killed off Kate altogether in the 1986 epilogue, though Kate had contemplated suicide earlier (447). O'Brien has called Baba "my alter-ego," noting that "I did have school friends who were the opposite of myself, and they were extrovert and mischievous, more mischievous. I was drawn towards them as I always am towards opposites" (quoted in Eckley, 67). In the essay, "Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to Be Good Anymore" (1986),

6. I want to thank Michelle Manculich, a student in my Fall 1993 graduate seminar, who alerted me to Dowling's book and brought to our discussions the perspectives of social scientists' writing about the problems of alcoholism and sexual abuse. We noticed how many bildungsromans — not only Irish ones, but others such as the Australian Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* and, of course, D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* — have alcoholic, abusive fathers at their cores. My thanks go more generally to the twenty participants in that seminar, whose discussions of the bildungsroman contributed to my thinking in this essay.



she explained: "I decided to have two, one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was. . . . Coming back to them I knew that Baba's asperity had to prevail." Baba criticizes Kate in *Girls in Their Married Bliss*: "Her life was like a chapter of the inquisition" (387). Kate herself realizes later in the same novel that her mother (like herself) was "a self-appointed martyr" (476-77). Baba feels about Kate that "she was so damn servile I could have killed her" (421). So O'Brien does exactly that in her epilogue.

As a double-female bildungsroman, *The Country Girls Trilogy* is comparable to, but different from, Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*. Both books concern the interdependent lives of two female protagonists, yet otherwise they contrast quite sharply at both superficial and deeper levels. Kate O'Brien's Anna Murphy uses her scholarship to go forth positively into the world. Edna O'Brien's Caithleen Brady abandons her scholarship (like the protagonist of *The Dark*), follows a dissolute life in Dublin and London, and ends in eventual failure and death. There is no nice mother superior to rescue Caithleen from her cruel convent teacher, as in *The Land of Spices*. Helen Archer and Anna Murphy are separated by age difference and by the formal nature of their relationship. Yet they come to affect each other increasingly profoundly and positively. Caithleen Brady and Baba Brennan are always intimately attached as exact contemporaries and best friends, but they eventually grow apart. The closing theme of the trilogy's epilogue is that Baba could never finally reach the despairing Kate. While the convent provides a feminist oasis in which Helen and Anna can escape and overcome obstacles to their development as women, Caithleen/Kate and Baba must live and die in the large, impersonal, male-dominated worlds of Dublin and London.

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*THE DARK* AND ITS author are similar in several respects to *The Country Girls* and Edna O'Brien. Its setting in rural and small-town County Roscommon is not too far afield from O'Brien's rural Clare.<sup>7</sup> Quickly attracting much notoriety, *The Dark* was published in 1965, the year after *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, and like *The Country Girls*, it centers on a repressed Irish adolescence of the 1940's. Both novels begin *in medias res*, with the horrible spectre of the protagonist's father.

Like Edna O'Brien, and also like Joyce as well as Kate O'Brien, whose decision to leave Ireland to work on the Continent and in England was reconfirmed by the banning of *The Land of Spices*, McGahern has remained attached to Ireland. This attachment may be seen not only in Joyce's influence on his work but in the influence of quite a different writer, Tomás O Criomhain. The terse form of *The Dark* illustrates an artistic principle of O Criomhain's *AntOileánach* (*The Islandman*) (1929) noted by McGahern, namely an ability to strip his story

7. Roscommon is never actually named in the novel, but it seems a sure bet based on McGahern's own origins and the novel's extensively autobiographical features.

down to the bare essentials. *The Dark*'s short, episodic chapters are closer in form to *An tOileánach* than to the classical, embryonic five books of *A Portrait of the Artist*.<sup>8</sup>

As in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, abuse and loss are central themes in *The Dark*. Like Caithleen Brady, McGahern's young boy must try to overcome not only his abusive father, but also the loss of his mother. O'Brien has invented such a loss, as her own mother was very much alive when she wrote *The Country Girls*, but McGahern wrote out of his own experience, since his mother died when he was eleven, just like his protagonist in *The Dark*: "His mother had gone away . . . and left him to this" (*TD*, 9). This young boy is obsessed enough with the loss of his mother to make his earliest conscious ambition the priesthood, so he can say a Mass for her. He learns, however, that he must quickly rule out such a vocation because he feels unworthy and has other obsessions—particularly masturbation.

McGahern has been perhaps even more recurrently obsessed with his father-figure than O'Brien has been, from Reegan in *The Barracks* to Moran in *Amongst Women*. McGahern's protagonist eventually seeks reconciliation with the father, though one would never predict father-son reconciliation from the opening scene in *The Dark*, which is even more startlingly riveted on the violent, drunken father than is *The Country Girls*. Beginning immediately with McGahern's (in)famous "F-U-C-K" scene, the boy, naked, "had to lie in the chair, lie there and wait as a broken animal. Something in him snapped. He couldn't control his water and it flowed from him over the leather of the seat" (8). And perhaps even worse, the boy must endure "the old horror" of sexual as well as physical abuse; his father rubs him, makes him kiss him, makes him say he loves him (16). The boy's father is referred to as "Mahoney," though the boy calls him "Daddy." McGahern never mentions the first name of either father or son.

With this scene and McGahern's extensive attention to masturbation, we are indeed a step or two beyond *A Portrait*. Stephen may visit a prostitute, but even that scene is presented in very decorous, indirect language. Though he limits his sexual activities to his magazines and his sock, McGahern's protagonist gives up on purity more quickly than Stephen does: "Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It's a month since my last confession. I committed one hundred and forty impure actions with myself" (25).<sup>9</sup> This boy masturbates five times a day over an *Irish Independent* advertisement for women's underwear. McGahern has confirmed that he "deliberately picked" the *Independent* as "then the most staid newspaper in Ireland. . . . No convent was without the *Independent*" (Kennedy, "Q. & A."). Masturbating and studying his way to academic success in school, he addresses

8. Paul Devine outlines a sequence of four "sections" in *The Dark* that he argues "helps the novel overcome its tendency to be episodic" (51), but since this outline is imposed from the outside by Devine rather than clarified internally by McGahern (as in the case of Joyce's five clearly labelled books in *A Portrait*), Devine's thesis is unconvincing. *The Dark* really is an episodic novel in much the same way that *The Country Girls* and *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (and for that matter most Irish novels) are. For an extensive discussion of the loose, episodic narrative structure of Irish novels see *The Irish Novel* (in which my treatments of this issue are indexed on p. 355). As a "classical," five-part novel, *A Portrait* is the exception rather than the rule among Irish novels.

9. F.C. Molloy notes that "Young Mahoney's development . . . is somewhat akin to Stephen's. He must masturbate rather than go to a brothel" (14). But Molloy complains of "the inappropriateness of the confessional form for McGahern's pessimistic vision" (16).

his newspapers and his sock as "My love" (104). He is conditioned by his culture to be able to enjoy eroticism only if his object is defiled, exploited, and confined to his imagination. He admires and is enamored by young Mary Moran, but (now examining himself in detached second-person pronouns), "The only way you could have her . . . was as an old whore of your mind" (43).

As for Mahoney in the book's early chapters, the boy and his sisters "close their life against him" (10). They mimic him: "God, O God, O God" (22). And when his father swings his daughter by the hair, the boy warns him, "Hit and I'll kill you" (28), adding, "You wouldn't swing a pig like that," to which his father replies, "I'd swing anyone. . . . The whole lot of you are pigs" (29). McGahern exposes sexual harassment and the general abuse of girls and women by Irish males even more directly in the episodes describing the treatment of the boy's sister, Joan, by the draper to whom she's been apprenticed. The adolescent protagonist confronts the draper and brings Joan home. This runs parallel to the protagonist's own escape from the latent-homosexual clutches of his uncle, Father Gerald, after which he makes a definite decision not to join the priesthood.<sup>10</sup>

The boy's therapy and attempt at escape from these problems are found in "the grind." He devotes himself mindlessly to preparing for his Leaving Certificate exam, since his academic success is virtually the only positive aspect of his life. His hours of study also force his father to leave him alone a bit more, and the boy has already begun to soften on him as he increases his emotional distance. He thinks to himself, "You had no right to hate him, he was there to be loved too" (TD, 33). Later, the boy moves to self-accusation: "You wanted to say to him you were sorry but you weren't able" (TD, 97). When he does apologize, his father can reply only with angry words (TD, 98), but "what was strange to notice was that Mahoney was growing old" and "was far the more cautious" (TD, 110).

When the protagonist gets his "first" and wins a scholarship to University College Galway, he fantasizes about university life, but has no real clarity about what he wants to do there or with his life in general. His father brags about his son's success throughout the town and takes him out to a fancy, unusually expensive dinner, winning his son over: "You are marvellous, my father" (TD, 119), the boy now thinks. But then U.C.G. turns out to be abruptly disappointing: too many of his professors are cruel and cynical, and he is too bashful to throw himself into social life. He feels unable to go to a dance even though "this was the dream you'd left the stern and certain road of the priesthood to follow after" (TD, 132). After his physics professor sends him out of the room for smiling at the wrong time, he telegrams his father that he wants to leave U.C.G. and accept instead a clerkship at the Electricity Supply Board in Dublin, opting for safe, dull, civil-service work rather than continue in academia. Rather passive conversations with the dean of students and his father (who flies immediately to his side) confirm his decision.

10. Exaggerating a bit, yet not too far off the mark, Shaun O'Connell notes that "the whole male, adult population of *The Dark* is composed of child-molesters" ("Door," 260).

In an ending that could not be more diametrically opposed to Stephen's flighty, imminent departure to the Continent to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race," McGahern's antihero lies in the same bed as his father (just as he did early in the novel) in a Galway rooming house on the night before his departure for Dublin. We are left with this decidedly non-mythological closing dialogue:

"Good night so, Daddy."

"Good night, my son. God bless you." (*TD*, 142)

As Eileen Kennedy notes, "Stephen Dedalus is an urban hero who can leave Ireland boldly; but young Mahoney is a farmboy whose sights are set no higher than the city" ("The Novels," 121). McGahern's ending, which has generally left readers unhappy and critics dissatisfied, seems slyly ironic.<sup>11</sup> The irony is silent rather than stated.

The alternative interpretation, especially in the light of the artifices and experiments evident throughout McGahern's subsequent works, seems impossible. One has to doubt that true coming of age, artistic or otherwise, will be found by dropping out of school in order to join the civil service. McGahern's novel seems much more a warning than a prophecy. Stephen Dedalus prophesies (albeit somewhat ironically, in view of subsequent deflation in *Ulysses*); McGahern's protagonist simply screws up. There's a moral to McGahern's story, even though the author doesn't state it. Particularly in the cultural context of 1965, he seems to be saying to his (particularly young Irish male) readers, "Watch out, or this will happen to you." As Shaun O'Connell predicts, McGahern's protagonist will be "paralyzed in the civil service, an Irish purgatory" ("Door," 261).<sup>12</sup> While many early reviewers<sup>13</sup> and subsequent critics compared *The Dark* to *A Portrait*, actually the closer Joycean analogy is the story "A Little Cloud," in which Little Chandler, hopelessly lost at the end of the story, seems a version of what Joyce might have been if he had lacked artistic inspiration and courage.

Even though his father was initially more scary than Caithleen Brady's, by the end McGahern's protagonist is tied to him, even virtually subsumed by him. The father-son pair is the crucial one here, just as it is by the end of *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*, whereas in O'Brien's bildungsroman(s) the crucial pair is a young woman and her best female friend. The contrast here is one between inheriting the patriarchy in McGahern—however pathetic that patriarchy might be—versus nurturing sisterhood in O'Brien, even if that sisterhood is eventually depicted as futile by the end of her trilogy.

11. John Cronin typifies critical responses when he writes that *The Dark* is so determinedly bleak that the novel runs the risk of finding it impossible to bring it to any kind of convincing conclusion ("The Dark," 428), and he criticizes McGahern's ending as thin and unconvincing (429).

12. Similarly, Richard Lloyd writes that at the end, "McGahern's protagonist finally feels the darkness lifting. McGahern, however, does not leave the reader with the same impression. Mahoney... has not fulfilled his dreams: he has not said Mass for his mother, nor has he escaped the 'landscape of inhibition'" (40).

13. See Sampson (61) on early reviewers of *The Dark*. Sampson himself records his agreement (61-61, n. 2) with my point in *The Irish Novel* that "the ending of *The Dark* could not more deliberately invert, subvert, and deflate the *dénouement* of *A Portrait*" (274). Sampson adds the claim that "*The Dark* registers an intimate reflection on the aesthetic theories of Stephen.... There are marked differences of background, context, and character between the two young protagonists. While McGahern's novel shows indebtedness to Joyce, his vision in the novel reflects his need to define his own stance as an artist" (61-62, n.2).

\* \* \*

LIKE *THE DARK*, Brian Moore's *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* gives the reader the impression that Irish male adolescence in this period was dominated largely by masturbation and by the exam grind, and that reconciliation with the father was central to a young man's coming of age. This is the novel that Moore, painfully aware of the huge shadow of James Joyce, had tried—and succeeded in four earlier novels—to avoid writing. "I always felt maybe I should write that one day," he has remarked. "I suppose it's my bildungsroman" (quoted in Dahlie [1969], 85).

On the other hand, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* shows the extent to which Moore had already been writing himself through such earlier protagonists as Judith Hearne and also Diarmaid Devine in *The Feast of Lupercal* (1958), for like young Gavin Burke, these older protagonists are repressed Belfast characters who depend heavily on psychological fetishes such as Judith's picture of the Sacred Heart.<sup>14</sup> *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* opens with Gavin's conversation with his eleven-inch-tall statue of the Divine Infant of Prague. The statue tells Gavin, "You are my business" (*TEIC*, 7). This morality-play leitmotif continues via intermittent, conflicting advice from Gavin's "White Angel" and his "Black Angel." But Moore does not trace his protagonist's childhood and early adolescence according to the more typical development model found in *A Portrait*, *The Country Girls*, and *The Dark*. Instead, he begins with Gavin at seventeen, and centers his novel on the single, major experience that moves Gavin away from adolescence toward manhood: the German bombing of Belfast and Gavin's work with its victims as an enlisted member of the A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions). Only occasionally does he include a flashback to childhood such as Gavin's memory of "the washroom of the school gymnasium (the same washroom where, aged thirteen, he had been held immobile by two older boys while a third squirted urine from a water pistol into his face)" (*TEIC*, 120).

Gavin Burke has ludicrous masturbational fantasies rivalling those found in McGahern's exactly contemporaneous novel: "He saw himself, wearing his steel helmet, dashing into the house across the way to carry the typist downstairs, she half-naked and hysterical in her relief" (*TEIC*, 10-11). As in both *A Portrait* and *The Dark*, we encounter a young male protagonist who is unable to experience girls and women—whether Stephen's shadowy "E.C.," Gavin's girlfriend Sally Shannon, or McGahern's women in the underwear ads in the *Irish Independent*—as anything other than objects. But unlike McGahern's protagonist, and more like Caithleen Brady, Gavin does at least have friends and a social life. McGahern's young boy stays at home and grinds away toward an academic success that will ultimately lead him no further than the civil service; but as was the case with Moore himself (see O'Donoghue, xi-xii), Gavin Burke cannot pass the "London Matric" exam because he has problems with math, yet his enlistment in the A.R.P. gets him out of the house and into instructive human

14. See Toolan, 100.

relationships, both good ones and bad ones. Moore subsequently mentioned that "*Emperor* was written at a crucial time in my life. . . I started a new life halfway through the writing of it, I fell in love, remarried and so on." Bruce Stovel's impression is that "Gavin's story is as much Moore's nostalgic *Goodbye to All That* as his bildungsroman" (189).

In the midst of the otherwise mostly seedy older males who work at the A.R.P. station, Freddy Hargreaves is a socialist and older-brother figure who introduces Gavin to the poetry of Eliot and Auden. Much of Moore's episodic A.R.P. material—demonic chief officer Craig, older yet ambitious Soldier MacBride, alcoholic Captain Lambert—seems to take the novel a bit too far at times from Gavin's development into a rather picaresque *roman à clef* drawn from Moore's own wartime experiences. As John Wilson Foster notes, it is as if "Moore, with two American-based novels behind him . . . were retracing his steps to pick up anything important he may have overlooked on his post-haste trek out of Northern Ireland en route to New York City" (123). On the other hand, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* does provide an urban counterpart to the different rural worlds of *The Dark* and *The Country Girls*, and Gavin Burke does come to grips with history in a way that the even more self-centered Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait* does not. "He walked, caught in a cold excitement, feeling himself witness to history, to the destruction of the city he had lived in all his life" (*TEIC*, 166). Gavin rejects both sides of the sectarian divide in Belfast, reflecting Moore's own conviction that "both Protestantism and Catholicism in Northern Ireland are the most desperate tragedies that can happen to people. . . I feel there should be a pox on both their houses" (quoted in Foster, 129). Only the "horrors of war" allowed people in Belfast at mid-century to temporarily forget the sectarian divide.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Stephen, Gavin is not shown trying to write himself, but he does like reading literature, and is capable of insights about what he reads: he decides that "Hitler was Yeats's 'Second Coming'" (*TEIC*, 10), and that in the case of Ireland since 1916, "the terrible beauty was born aborted" (*TEIC*, 105). Some of these insights seem to be more the older author's rather than his younger protagonist's, and do occasionally appear to be "unnecessary 'literary' allusions to some of the apocalyptic literature of the age" (Hirschberg, 14). Of course, like his compatriots, Moore was also well aware of the conventions of the bildungsroman. As Foster reminds us, the bildungsroman typically contains "three great forms of adolescent 'awakening' . . . : the initiation into sexuality, the questioning of religious faith, and the discovery of literature and art" (*TEIC*, 117). Irish adolescence at mid-century, however, as described by our three novelists, included an "initiation into sexuality" limited to masturbation and flirtation, while faith could be questioned and literature could be appreciated more completely.

Gavin Burke's development appears to be more successful than that of either

15. See Cronin, "Ulster's Alarming Novels," 312. O'Connell similarly writes that "it takes a horrific external threat, a German Armageddon, to make Belfast tolerable to a Moore hero" ("Brian Moore's Ireland," 542).

O'Brien's Caitheleen/Kate, who fails and dies, or McGahern's protagonist, whose decision to join the civil service seems like very pale success. By the end of *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*, Gavin has shown his courage by volunteering to help prepare the corpses of Belfast bombing victims for burial, he has stood up to his father, and he has decided that he must strike out on his own rather than pursue the kind of conventional life that his father, Sally Shannon, and others have mapped out for him. Gavin's father is typical of many people in Belfast in believing that Hitler would not bomb their city, and that England's difficulty would be Ireland's opportunity, with Hitler working to Irish nationalist advantage. The German bombing of Belfast was thus a harsh dose of reality; as Mr. Burke later admits, "The German jackboot is a far crueler burden than the heel of old John Bull" (*TEIC*, 163). Yet at this point, "Within Gavin there started an extraordinary elation. . . . The world and the war had come to him at last" (*TEIC*, 151). His initial reaction is immature, self-centered, and rather ridiculous: "Why was he filled with excitement, with a feeling that, tonight, nothing could kill him, that, like the knight in some ancient romance, he carried a shield which stood between him and all harm?" (*TEIC*, 159).

Gavin's all-night work with the victim's corpses is a pivotal experience for him. The first body that he encounters in the makeshift morgue is that of a young mill worker in her twenties, "the first naked body of an adult woman he had ever really looked at in his life" (*TEIC*, 177). She is no titillating sex-object, but part of the horror of war. Earlier he caught sight of "the bare, callused feet of an old woman, sticking out from the bottom of a pile of bodies" (*TEIC*, 176), and he feels that he understands for the first time the Wallace Stevens lines whose sound had earlier enchanted him:

If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.  
Let the lamp affix its beam.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Now Gavin feels that he has come of age: "he felt that, in volunteering for this job, he had done the first really grown-up thing in his life," though Moore also shows that self-centered adolescence cannot be overcome completely or quickly: "Wait'll Sally heard what he was doing. She'd be sorry she sounded off like that last night. Big baby, indeed" (*TEIC*, 178).

Like *The Dark*, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* culminates in reconciliation between father and son. This reconciliation, however, does not appear to include the ironic possibilities that McGahern seems to have in mind. Kerry McSweeney notes that "Ellmann has remarked that Joyce was more interested in paternal love than in sexual love: similarly, in Brian Moore's novels parental relationships are at least as important as sexual relationships" ("Brian Moore," 56). Gavin meets his father, who has temporarily removed his family from bombed-out Belfast to Dublin, back at their house at the end:

In the candlelight, he saw that his father was crying. He had never seen his father cry before. Did his father know that the house was condemned, did his father know that everything had changed, that things would never be the same again? A new voice, a cold grown-up voice within him said: 'No.' His father was the child now; his father's world was dead. . . . From now on, he would know these things.

His father seemed aware of this change. He leaned his untidy, gray head on Gavin's shoulder, nodding, weeping, confirming. 'Oh, Gavin,' his father said. 'I've been a fool. Such a fool.'

The new voice counselled silence. He took his father's hand (*TEIC*, 198-99).

At the end, Gavin sympathizes with his father, "just as Brian Moore sympathizes with all his disheartened characters" (Prosky, 118).

Moore has indicated that this was the first novel he wrote in which he knew the ending in advance. Frankly, it shows: this ending seems too pat. Bruce Cook complains that at the end Gavin's father and Moore's other characters "cave in, rather than change" (458), and Jo O'Donoghue is convinced that "the crisis of the blitz has caused the suspension of normal family activity and hostility, but these will be only too ready to reassert themselves in peace-time" (74). One has to agree that at novel's end, Gavin Burke seems naive and self-congratulatory. He has chosen to stay in Belfast; Moore himself had to leave in order to gain his freedom. Moore may have intended Gavin as an inspiration, but we respond to him as a warning of what will come to those who stay behind.

If Gavin is more successful than O'Brien's and McGahern's protagonists, it is partly because he enjoys advantages over them: his father is a successful lawyer, neither an alcoholic nor an abuser, and Gavin's parents have provided him with a relatively comfortable home complete with even a maid (67). O'Donoghue goes so far as to call *Emperor* "comic" because Gavin "has no reason to be depressed" and "thinks that people like him will change the world" (71-72). His father's greatest crimes apparently are that he held overly simplistic views of Irish nationalism and the world crisis, and that, like Moore's actual father, who once called James Joyce a "sewer" (quoted in Green, 170), he disapproves of the writers that his son admires. Moore commented on his father: "He believed totally in the things he believed in; he was very uncompromising. . . . I thought my father was wrong. I thought all my uncles and my relatives were wrong because . . . they were idealists of their generation—narrow, parochial idealists" (quoted in Dahlie [1969], 3-4). Such political and literary disagreements seem relatively minor beside the physical and alcoholic abuses practiced by the fathers in *The Country Girls* and *The Dark*. As Foster complains, "in his ending Moore confuses Gavin's entrance into manhood with a spurious corollary—the defeat of psychological and social attitudes around him" (130).

\* \* \*

GENDER ISSUES NEED to be confronted as squarely in McGahern and Moore as they have been in O'Brien, even though the critical tendency has been to foreground O'Brien's female status while nearly completely ignoring the importance of explaining the experiences of McGahern's and Moore's protagonists, beyond their masturbation, in light of their maleness. If Edna O'Brien is a woman writer,



then it is equally true that McGahern and Moore are “male writers”; they are not simply “writers” within a reputedly sexless, but in fact clearly sexist, canon of a male-constructed “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Is it just a coincidence that McGahern and Moore give us boys whose experiences culminate in reconciliation with their fathers, while O’Brien’s country girl flees her father as swiftly as she can, leaving him further and further behind as she moves from Clare to Dublin, Dublin to London and her ultimate demise? I don’t think so.

McGahern and Moore present us with patriarchal worlds in which either Father Knows Best—albeit partly ironically in *The Dark*—or Boy Wonder Knows Even Better than Father, in *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*. In *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O’Brien exposes a patriarchal world in which Caitheleen/Kate Brady is almost necessarily cast aside. The Irish adult world is equally patriarchal in *The Dark*, and critiqued as such by McGahern, though his protagonist nonetheless joins this world at the end.

Our three novelists suggest that the sexes scarcely met, in any constructive or meaningful way, in mid-century Irish adolescence: Caitheleen Brady is consistently a victim of her father, Mr. Gentleman, and Eugene; McGahern’s protagonist makes love only to his sock; and Gavin Burke relates superficially to his mere shadow of a girlfriend, Sally Shannon, whose superficiality is more Moore’s fault than her own. Is it the Irish male’s preferred fate to take a civil service job and join the patriarchy, while the Irish woman can expect to leave and die? One might come to such a conclusion from these novels. Such a dichotomy, however, is complicated by the biographical facts that Moore, like O’Brien, left Ireland too, and that McGahern lost his job and went to England before eventually returning.

There are recurrent patterns in these bildungsromans that suggest the difficult nature of trying to come of age in Ireland during the 1940’s, and perhaps still today, for both women and men.<sup>16</sup> O’Connell notes that “it has been argued that McGahern is too much a child of his generation, locked into the problems which faced young men in the 1950’s, his decade of coming-of-age. Anthony Cronin, Irish man of letters, has suggested that McGahern, like Edna O’Brien, persists in misrepresenting Ireland—which Cronin sees as urban, open and secular—by portraying “characters who are dominated by rural values, taboos and religious repressions” (“Door,” 261). But it remains clear that the problems exposed by McGahern and O’Brien were quite real: they cost McGahern his job, and they pushed O’Brien into divorce and into exile in London. Moreover, the loss of a job, the need to leave Ireland, and the difficulty of male-female relationships continue to be typical rather than unusual problems for Irish people, especially in a church-dominated state that continues its legal ban on divorce.

But it is also true that Moore’s *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* provides a kind of antidote to the syndrome that Anthony Cronin laments in McGahern and

16. Similar patterns can be found in a great many Irish novels, including male ones whose gender issues have been neglected by critics. Occasionally, Irish bildungsromans follow different, less predictable patterns, as in Desmond Hogan’s novels *The Icon Maker* (1976) and *The Leaves on Grey* (1980), in which gay characters and postmodernist writing scramble the traditionally heavily bipolar gender roles in Irish fiction.

O'Brien. As we have seen, Moore writes from an urban and international perspective, presenting us in Gavin Burke with a Belfast boy who, despite all his shortcomings, overcomes religious taboos and cultural repressions and prepares himself, as Moore did, to grow up, leave Ireland, and meaningfully confront more diverse human relationships and problems. Gavin appears to succeed, while O'Brien's Kate Brady eventually fails and dies, and McGahern's protagonist drops out and departs for the Irish civil service, seen by many Irish people as secure but also a form of death-in-life. Yet somehow O'Brien's and McGahern's protagonists seem more compelling in their disappointments and failures than Gavin Burke does in his apparent success.

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