



“Nationality (if this is not really a useful fiction like many others which the scalpels of present-day scientists have put paid to) must find its basic reason for being in something that surpasses, that transcends and that informs changeable entities such as blood or human speech.” Consider the various ways in which Irish literature has both advanced and critiqued the construction of a national identity and culture

Lucy Hayes

In this quotation from Joyce, the “scientists” imply that national identity cannot stand up to scientific logic, yet the question suggests that writers are at least partially responsible for the construction of this entity – indicating that they see it as necessary. I will consider Joyce’s criticisms and suggestions in *Dubliners*, and compare these with McCabe’s *Winterwood*. The latter was written nearly a century later, so I will consider how perceptions of ‘Irishness’ have changed throughout the tumultuous 20th century. I will look in detail at four of the *Dubliners* stories’, following Joyce’s ‘Ages of Man’ schema; the short stories follow a life cycle of four ‘ages’. I have chosen one story from each: ‘An Encounter’ for childhood, ‘Eveline’ for adolescence, ‘Counterparts’ for mature life, and ‘The Dead’ to represent public life.

Joyce criticised elements of national identity, but hoped that by showing these to the Irish people they would change their ways. Upon objections to printing *Dubliners*, he wrote, “I seriously believe you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass”.¹ Civilisation is a loaded term, so we must consider what Joyce aimed to change about, or create within, the Irish people. McCabe commented, “I remember picking up a copy of *Dubliners* [while living] there and thinking, ‘This could have been written yesterday’”.² He implies that Joyce’s concerns are still pertinent in the Ireland of the 20th and 21st century. The chronological sections of *Winterwood* make it proximal to the reader, showing that he deals with contemporary Ireland. His novel extends the themes addressed by Joyce, showing that a truthful Irish national identity has still not been created.

Miss Ivors in ‘The Dead’ is shown to be self-consciously Irish, wearing a conspicuously large brooch with “an Irish device and motto”. When she accuses Gabriel of being a “West Briton” for writing for *The Daily Express*, he is offended, but shortly afterwards bursts out, “I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!”³ Seamus Deane wrote that Gabriel’s refusal of his own culture, and his anxiously nursed cosmopolitanism, betrays many

¹ James Joyce: *Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Morris Beja (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973), p.40

² ‘St. Macartan, Minnie the Minx and Mondo Movies: Elliptical Peregrinations through the Subconscious of a Monaghan Writer Traumatized by Cows and the Brilliance of James Joyce’, Christopher FitzSimon’s interview with Patrick McCabe, in *Irish University Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1998), pp. 182-3. Accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25484768> on 27 December 2009.

³ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1939), pp. 213, 216

features of the colonial dependent.⁴ While Gabriel thinks, “Their grade of culture differed from his... He would fail with them just as he had failed with the girl in the pantry”.⁵ He uses snobbery to cover up his feelings of inadequacy. This stems from his mother’s insistent social climbing, which left him unable to interact with many people whom he has been conditioned to condescend to. The ridiculous image of the daughter of a starch mill owner calling her sons Gabriel and Constantine (and Gabriel’s belief that this helped their success) shows Joyce’s damning views of the pretentious arrogance of the aspiring middle class. Joyce criticises those who feel they have to abandon their heritage to advance themselves intellectually; the colonial view of Ireland must be challenged for it to be taken seriously as a nation. However, Joyce himself left Ireland, first in 1902, never returning to Dublin after 1912.⁶ Joyce wrote about Ireland from mainland Europe for his entire career; having escaped Dublin, he felt he could see Ireland clearly from the outside. This has been described as his “exile as a mode of genius”.⁷

In *Winterwood*, McCabe shows that Ireland still clings to its folkloric image, no matter how false that may be. ‘Enchanted Days: Courtship in the Ireland of Long Ago’ is darkly ironic as by this point in the novel, the reader already knows that Ned murdered his “sweetheart”, Annamarie Gordon.⁸ McCabe believes ideas of Irish rural life have become so crystallized that the villagers will love a deranged, paedophilic alcoholic, and his protagonist will reconcile himself to Slievenageeha despite his horrific childhood, purely as a link to the past which we have been conditioned to believe was a better, more innocent time – and which is also the basis of a certain kind of Irish identity. As Cowles observed, “A lot of writers insist it’s dangerous to forget the past, but McCabe suggests it’s more dangerous to remember it – or at least sentimentalize it, which in his universe amounts to the same thing”.⁹ By transforming their view of Ireland’s past, his characters also mutate their identity in the present. Thus McCabe underscores his belief that national identity must be based on truth.

Joyce described Dublin as “that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city”; this is a central theme in all the stories.¹⁰ Even the small boys in ‘An Encounter’ recognise the need to escape; the unnamed narrator realises that real adventures “must be sought abroad”, which shows how early the realisation occurs that freedom requires breaking the mould.¹¹ Practically, this translates to escaping Dublin, abandoning all ties and obligations. Joyce did not believe that ideas of nationality should stem from a sense of duty and tradition, lest they become stale and objectionable.

In ‘Eveline’, the protagonist’s name is significant in itself. It is a variant on Eve, meaning ‘life’, ironic as she surrenders to a life of paralysis and sorrow.¹² By abandoning her lover, she distances herself from Eve’s role as the first wife and mother, with the implication that she may spend the rest of her life caring for her ungrateful and abusive father. Eveline had promised her mother “to keep the home together as long as she could”, yet wants nothing more than to leave.¹³ Joyce did not believe one should be defined by ‘blood’: this contrasts with the traditional image of the family as “one of the most enduring and resonant of Irish

⁴ Seamus Deane, ‘Dead Ends: Joyce’s Finest Moments’ in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.35

⁵ Joyce, *Dubliners*, p.203

⁶ Richard Ellman, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp.110, 349

⁷ Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, ed. by Stephen Clingman (London: Jonathon Cape, 1988), p.288

⁸ Patrick McCabe, *Winterwood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) p.44

⁹ Gregory Cowles, ‘Review: Patrick McCabe’s *Winterwood*’, *New York Times*, 2 March 2007. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/28/arts/28iht-idbriefs3C.4750112.html> on 23 December 2009

¹⁰ *James Joyce: Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Morris Beja (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973), p.35

¹¹ Joyce, *Dubliners*, pp.19-20

¹² *Dictionary of First Names*, ed. by Julia Cresswell (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), p.95

¹³ Joyce, *Dubliners*, p.41

cultural obsessions”.¹⁴ Joyce resented that “commonplace sacrifices” had become a defining element of the Irish mother.¹⁵

Joyce objected to Yeats’ assertion that life was “sterile when it is not married to nature”, and depicted the urban lives that had been largely ignored by the ‘Irish literary revival’.¹⁶ While Joyce did not give a positive view of Dublin, he believed it to be a more accurate representation of Irish identity than the rural peace Yeats revered. Joyce thought it important that the negative aspects of Ireland were not brushed over in favour of painting an idyllic myth of rural life, as the cultural nationalists of the ‘revival’ seemingly advocated. His very decision to set his stories in Dublin subverts this myth. The cultural nationalist movement developed as Dublin degenerated into one of the poorest and most disease-ridden European cities; the movement tried to escape this harsh reality by taking solace in the beauty and imagined perfection of the countryside, yet by doing so they interiorised the colonial attitude of England’s superiority to Ireland. English writers like Wordsworth and Arnold had created an image of the Irish as “a quaint but essentially disempowered race of peasants”.¹⁷ Both Joyce and McCabe subvert this expectation. They want to focus not on an ideal, false Ireland, but on the real problems that Ireland faces: only by doing this can a true national identity be formed.

The supernatural played a large part in the Irish literary revival, and is used in a very different way by McCabe. His ghosts fit well with the Gothic vision that hope of change in the present is contradicted by the persistence of the sins of the past; “we are all victims of history, only most have not recognised it yet”.¹⁸ While the initial ghost scenes seem like a twisted haunting tale, we later learn it was Redmond’s repressed memories coming back to haunt him. While he first believes that Ned left the picture of ‘Little Red’ after the rape, we later learn that it was one of Uncle Florian’s ‘likenesses’; “Little Red had one of those photos... But he’d destroyed it in the end, torn it into pieces, one night he’d got drunk”.¹⁹ While McCabe initially draws the reader into thinking *Winterwood* is a ghost story, in the end it all links back to Redmond’s childhood at the hands of his relatives. McCabe paradoxically rejects the traditional view of Ireland, while continuing a traditionally Irish preoccupation with the supernatural. By constructing and simultaneously deconstructing the traditions of Ireland he again subverts the false national identity of folklore and myth.

The lyrical last paragraph of ‘The Dead’ also contain elements of the supernatural, following Gabriel’s thoughts out across Ireland to Michael Furey’s grave, leading to his reflection that the snow is “falling faintly, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead”.²⁰ Deane describes the highly cadenced repetition of ‘faintly falling, falling faintly’ as an example of Joyce’s “universalising impulse” of turning solid into spectral.²¹ This is interesting in the comparison of *Dubliners* and *Winterwood*. Joyce translates the real world into the spectral as a way of emphasising his characters’ lack of certainty, and extending their personal problems to a wider context. McCabe, on the other hand, frequently shows the spectral becoming reality. The scene in which Ned’s ghost rapes Redmond is likely to have been a symptom of Redmond’s repressed memories of his childhood rape. The game of *Winterwood* assumes a horrific reality as the site of the murders. Also, Redmond’s dream in which Catherine transforms into Ned is echoed in ‘Eternity’; “Realising just who his

¹⁴ Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p.55

¹⁵ Joyce, *Dubliners*, p.49

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats cited in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.103

¹⁷ Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation*, p.59

¹⁸ Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation*, p.52

¹⁹ Patrick McCabe, *Winterwood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p.191

²⁰ Joyce, *Dubliners*, p.256

²¹ Seamus Deane, ‘Dead Ends: Joyce’s Finest Moments’ in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.36

companion was, as I flashed my incisors and drew him towards me: Little Red".²² Redmond becomes physically and mentally more similar to Ned throughout the novel; this change is completed when the first-person narrative shifts into Ned's voice in the last chapter. McCabe uses the repeated motif of fantasy becoming reality to demonstrate how the imaginary image of an idyllic Ireland has been imposed over a harsh reality.

Ned's early assertion, "The mountain doesn't go away", keeps coming back to Redmond as he increasingly finds himself unable to develop beyond the cycle of depression and abuse set in place by his childhood. When Redmond leaves instructions to be buried there, he makes the ironic understatement, "Which may seem to some cynical, when you think of the things I've said about it in the past".²³ Unlike Joyce's characters, Redmond manages to escape, but repeatedly returns to Slievenageeha and even helps expound the false vision of idyllic rural Ireland. In 1907 Joyce had asserted, "Just as ancient Egypt is dead, so is ancient Ireland. Its dirge has been sung and a seal set upon its gravestone".²⁴ McCabe extends Joyce's idea that any idyllic version of Ireland is untrue; a century later he is writing in a different social context, where the acceleration and rapid changes in contemporary Irish life have produced a reactive urge to recover an imaginary past, furthering the spread of self-deluding nostalgia. McCabe shows that the ideas of ancient Ireland are still misguidedly used as a basis for national identity.

McCabe differs significantly from Joyce in that he uses a fictional place as the centre of his novel; this could be to demonstrate that the problems he addresses apply to the whole country, not one particular region. It is the metaphorical rot at the centre of McCabe's Ireland. McCabe also further emphasises the imaginary nature of the 'Irishness' the villagers falsely believe Ned embodies.

In both texts, characters deal with their problems by imagining better realities. In 'Eveline', while she feels trapped, she still invents reasons to stay. "But now she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly undesirable life"; she looks for excuses to stay to hide her fear of leaving.²⁵ Eveline pretends that she has some control over her life; that she stays because she chooses, not because she is trapped. 'Counterparts' emphasises the paralysis of the mind. Farrington feels forcedly separate from his body's primal instincts: "His body ached to do something, to rush out and revel in violence".²⁶ He has to constantly control and repress himself, forcing an unnatural subservience to cover his dissatisfaction with his job, friends and family. However when he comes out of the pawn shop, he is described "looking on the spectacle generally with proud satisfaction and staring masterfully at the office girls... He preconsidered the terms in which he would narrate the incident to the boys".²⁷ His brief moment of glory makes him feel in charge of his life and at one with his frustrated body, although in truth he has simply lost his watch and, in all probability, his job. Farrington tries to repress the reality of his situation. Joyce uses this to demonstrate how one must face up to problems to deal with them; this links to nationality in that he believed it was pointless creating an idealistic vision of Irish identity, as this did nothing to alleviate the problems which Ireland faced.

While Joyce's characters fantasise about slightly better worlds, Redmond gradually progresses to outright psychosis. The unreliability of Ned is initially addressed flippantly; "You definitely, at times, did get the impression that he was making [it] up as he went along". However, early in the novel the similarity between 'Red and Ned' is hinted at. We discover

²² McCabe, *Winterwood*, p.242

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177, 7, 218

²⁴ James Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', in *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.125

²⁵ Joyce, *Dubliners*, p.39

²⁶ Joyce, *Dubliners*, pp. 100, 105, 107

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.103

that Hatch, Redmond's surname, is a corruption of the Irish *ait*, meaning place – or strange. “Red Strange from the mountain – sounds kind of familiar, you have to admit.”²⁸ As Redmond undergoes a mental breakdown, the reader increasingly questions his narrative. The initial sympathy when his wife leaves him is gradually undermined by the repeated motif, “Never lift a hand to your wife”, eventually becoming sickeningly flippant as he says, “Talk about not lifting a hand to your wife! Why the poor woman was practically unrecognisable when he'd finished”. As he abducts Catherine, he says aloud, “You never pause to think that it might all be lies”, referring to marital bliss, but the comment has much further reaching implications.²⁹ The reader is privy to his constructed view of Ireland, as shown in his articles; this is the view that everyone wants to hear, even Redmond himself. The jarring difference between this widely accepted lie and the hidden truth causes Redmond to gradually model himself on the antihero of traditional Ireland, Ned Strange. McCabe confronts his reader's perceptions of Irish identity and culture, showing that ‘folklore’ may never be too far from fallacy, violence and abuse.

The theme of madness in McCabe's work could be read as a comment on decolonisation. Fanon argued that decolonisation causes a constant questioning of one's identity, usually against a context of violence. This makes the ‘colonised’ subjects far more prone to psychological instability.³⁰ While Redmond undoubtedly questions his identity, he seems utterly at ease with Ireland's emergence from its colonised past; perhaps too at ease. His only mention of the ‘context of violence’, the Troubles, is that Bill Clinton arrived to “help sort out the problems in Ulster”. He then comments, “[I] don't bother with politics at all these days... I'm still too busy thinking about the man I once knew as Ned Strange”.³¹ McCabe shows how Red's continued descent into madness causes him to focus on the mythical and not the actual identity of Ireland.

Both authors reinforce their comments about national identity through their representations of voice. The unreliability of the narrator, which is central to the narrative of *Winterwood*, is aided by McCabe's unorthodox representation of speech. It is hard to know what has been thought by Redmond and what has been said aloud. This adds to the uncertainty of the novel, which in turn emphasises the ongoing questioning of identity. Joyce uses free indirect discourse to easily represent the thoughts of his characters while maintaining an external narrative voice. However, in his three ‘childhood’ stories he uses a retrospective first person narrative. In ‘An Encounter’, the child narrator muses, “He seemed to have forgotten his recent liberalism”; clearly Joyce did not aim to create the authentic voice of a child.³² This could be a comment that in childhood the characters are still free; the first person voice puts them in charge of their own stories, and they are not yet defined by a label with which society judges them (Eveline the shop girl, Farrington the scrivener and so on). The adults are soon so worn down by Dublin life that they resign themselves to having no control over their own stories, glumly following a path that leads only to depression and despair. Thus Joyce comments that a national identity must also be one that allows the people their own, individual identities.

Joyce believed religion was a flawed base for national identity. He once commented, “I do not see what good it does to fulminate against the English tyranny while the Roman tyranny occupies the palace of the soul”.³³ In his short stories he criticises religion for being as much of an instrument of repression and violence as colonialism. The saint depicted on the

²⁸ McCabe, *Winterwood*, pp.44, 129

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.12, 103, 198

³⁰ Frantz Fanon quoted in Smyth, *The Novel and The Nation*, pp.48-9

³¹ McCabe, *Winterwood*, p.93

³² Joyce, *Dubliners*, p.27

³³ James Joyce, ‘Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages’, in *James Joyce: Occasional, Critical and Political Writing* ed. Kevin Barry (Oxford University Press, 2002), p.125

bedroom wall in 'Eveline' is the "Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque".³⁴ She was a seventeenth-century saint so devoted to Christ that she practiced severe corporal mortification, considered a way to demonstrate faith, and significantly she was also paralysed for four years until healed by the Virgin Mary.³⁵ This continues Joyce's theme of paralysis, and also criticises a religion which promotes harm to oneself as a way to salvation. It reinforces Joyce's belief that faith in God cannot save anyone from the paralysis of Dublin, only self-will. Ironically the picture is juxtaposed with another, of the priest who "is in Melbourne now", which is one of the many symbols of escape in the story. At the end of 'Eveline', she "prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty... A bell clanged upon her heart".³⁶ She believes it is her duty to stay cowed under her father's fist. He believes that religion reinforces the flaws already present in Irish national identity.

McCabe's criticism of religion is even less subtle. He talks of the "Men of God in this once-innocent isle" accused of child abuse, juxtaposing it with Redmond's description of himself; "I seemed the loveliest old-timer you ever laid eyes on. With nothing but goodness and decency in my heart". McCabe questions whether innocence was ever anything more than a construct. The most damning depiction of religion is when the nuns ignore the fact that Redmond is being abused, because they lust after Florian; "That's what they were thinking of when he'd stroke his chin, stroke his chin and give them a wink".³⁷ McCabe suggests that 'goodness' in religion is only a guise, and that ideas like piety and purity are only part of the costume donned with the habit and rosary. Thus, he agrees with Joyce that religion is a hollow ideal within Irish national identity.

The association of violence and sexual depravity is made in a less explicit way in 'An Encounter'. The boy describes the old man muttering obsessively about young girls. Shortly after this, Mahony shouts, "I say! Look at what he's doing! ...He's a queer old jossler". Joyce leaves significant conclusions up to the reader. The man's mind begins the same obsessive circling when he begins to talk about whipping boys; "[He] grew almost affectionate and seemed to plead with me that I should understand him".³⁸ The clear mental instability of the man and his predatory sexual behaviour, coupled with Joyce's elliptic narrative technique, is similar to McCabe. Both supply a metaphor for the fact that people ignore the problems in Ireland by omitting information themselves.

Joyce described nationality as illogical, yet a "useful fiction". In *Dubliners*, he draws attention to the flaws in Ireland's national identity; while nationality has the potential to be useful, he believed the national identity of the early 20th century was detrimental to Ireland. In these two very different texts, Joyce and McCabe show a remarkably similar approach to the construction of national identity. Joyce argued that we must challenge the colonial view of Ireland for it to be taken seriously as a nation, and to address the problems within the country. McCabe, clearly frustrated by the continued prevalence of the internalised colonial views produced by the Celtic revival, juxtaposes 'traditionally Irish' concerns against the harsh 'truth' of his narrative. While he does not imply that all of rural Ireland is as hellish as Slievenageeha, he uses his narrative to show how untrue the qualities valued by the revival can be, despite still being the popular perception of rural Ireland. While McCabe admires Joyce (it is perhaps no coincidence both books end with falling snow), it is the shared staunch belief that if Ireland is to have a 'national identity' it should be based on truth that accounts for their similarities. They subvert the expectations of being 'Irish writers', focusing on real problems rather than false mythologies.

³⁴ Joyce, *Dubliners*, p.38

³⁵ Sister Mary Bernard Doll, 'Margaret Mary Alacoque' in *The Original Catholic Encyclopaedia*, accessed at http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Margaret_Mary_Alacoque on 14 December 2009

³⁶ Joyce, *Dubliners*, pp.109, 43

³⁷ McCabe, *Winterwood*, pp.204, 190

³⁸ Joyce, *Dubliners*, pp.26, 28

Bibliography

Adams, Tim 'The Horror Behind The Blarney', *The Observer*, 19 November 2006, accessed at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/nov/19/fiction.patrickmccabe>

Attridge, Derek and Howes, Marjorie, *Semicolonial Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

Barry, Kevin (ed.) *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Beja, Morris (ed.) *James Joyce: Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973)

Cowles, Gregory 'Review: Patrick McCabe's *Winterwood*', *New York Times*, 2 March 2007, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/28/arts/28iht-idbriefs3C.4750112.html>

Cresswell, Julia (ed.) *Dictionary of First Names* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994)

Ellmann, Richard *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965)

FitzSimon, Christopher, 'St. Macartan, Minnie the Minx and Mondo Movies: Elliptical Peregrinations through the Subconscious of a Monaghan Writer Traumatized by Cows and the Brilliance of James Joyce', in *Irish University Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1998).

Gordimer, Nadine, *The Essential Gesture*, ed. by Stephen Clingman (London: Jonathon Cape, 1988)

Joyce, James *Dubliners* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1939)

McCabe, Patrick *Winterwood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006)

Smyth, Gerry *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997)

The Original Catholic Encyclopaedia, accessed at <http://oce.catholic.com/index.php>