

Art, biography, and philosophy three aspects of John McGahern's short fiction as exemplified by Gold watch, Like all other men, and The white boat.

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[The Short Stories of John MacGahern](#)

Art, biography, and philosophy three aspects of John McGahern's short fiction as exemplified by "Gold watch", "Like all other men", and "The white boat"

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Résumé

McGahern's short stories exhibit similar qualities as his novels. Three aspects are perceived as recurring, namely art, biography and philosophy. The stories selected to analyse these aspects in more detail are "Gold Watch", "Like All Other Men"

and “The White Boat”. The first text, for instance, is a revealing example of how the writer exploited episodes and characters from his own range of experience without simply creating autobiography but something new and artistic: a fictional narrative. All three stories are fundamentally linked by means of their artistic construction. The author architecturally shapes his prose to form a series of chiasmic structures that frame decisive moments in these narratives and thus underline the circularity of his themes. It is this focus on form that characterises McGahern’s deceptively simple prose and contributes to the notion that his short stories are indeed poetry in prose



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It is quite likely that John McGahern will remain better known for his longer fiction than for his short stories. After all, it was his second novel, *The Dark* (1965), which first turned him into a celebrity. The cause was the notorious scene that depicts a priest’s sexual advances towards a teenage boy. The church, which controlled the educational system in Ireland at the time, saw to it that the young writer who dared to blacken the reputation of her servants was dismissed from his position as a schoolteacher and thus McGahern became a victim of Irish censorship and, at the same time, he achieved fame. *Amongst Women* (1990), arguably his best novel, further contributed to the novelist’s reputation since it was shortlisted for the 1990 Booker Prize. Although the book did not win, its author was praised for “the relentless accuracy of his prose, and the graceful portrayal of his characters” (Callil/Tóibín 114). Despite this public acknowledgement of the longer texts it is the carefully crafted short stories, their prose exhibiting the same quality of timeless beauty as his novels, that probably best display McGahern’s masterful command of language and also underline his focus on ever recurring themes. As these narratives create an intimate Irish cosmos that nevertheless achieves universal appeal it may well be that the stories will eventually turn out to be the author’s true masterpieces.

2 McGahern’s writings are characterised by circular structures and pervasive

themes; these qualities have been observed by a number of critics such as Bertrand Cardin (1995: 178), Carmen Callil and Colm Tóibín (114), Penelope Fitzgerald (21) or Edward T. Wheeler (15). The author focuses on seasons and seasonal farm work as well as on the circle of life in order to underline the circularity of human affairs. In a similar vein as William Faulkner and his Yoknapatawpha County the Irish author conceives and regularly revisits familiar settings; he reiterates constellations and situations, and he even avails himself of the same recurrent names (cf. Lloyd, 1987; Prusse 2001: 136). The three short narratives selected for this study portray typical moments in McGahern's fictional universe: "Like All Other Men" relates the awkward affair between a man and a woman set in a drab and rainy Dublin; in "Gold Watch" there is a more successful encounter between a man and a woman but the story revisits the problematic relationship between patriarchs and their sons; last but not least, "The White Boat" recounts a life in exile, enriched with numerous contemplations of experiences past and present. Taken together the three stories exemplify what is postulated as three central aspects of the author's fiction, namely art, biography and philosophy. Simply lumping these three stories under the respective headings of art, biography and philosophy, however, would be untrue and unfair to the author's creative imagination. The point must certainly be made that all three narratives stem to some extent from the author's biography; all of them are extremely well constructed (and hence artistic), and allude to numerous other literary texts; and finally, all the stories contain or hint at contemplations on life and thus may, to some extent, be called philosophical.

3In fact it will be the construction of the three stories that will provide the fundamental common link between all of them. There are a number of parallels that can be established between two out of the three but the artist's deliberate architectural shaping of his prose is an essential element in all the narratives under discussion and a trademark of McGahern's prose in general. The author is clearly, as I have shown in a paper given at the Rewriting/Reprising Conference in Lyon (2006), also a very literary writer. His short story, "Korea" for instance, is evidently modelled on Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp" (cf. Prusse 2006). Furthermore, the Irish writer may well have been influenced by Hemingway's preference for chiastic arrangements and, while not as dedicated or elaborate in making use of these constructions as the American writer, he nevertheless employs a similar technique of a deceptively simple prose characterized by frequent verbal repetitions in all three stories under discussion, invariably framing central moments in those stories by means of a short chiasmus. My brief analysis, "Symmetry Matters: John McGahern's 'Korea' as Hypertext of Ernest Hemingway's 'Indian Camp'," demonstrates that the writer attempted to imitate the chiastic arrangements that can be found in many of Hemingway's short stories. The main example there shows a rather detailed construction that is almost chiastic as a whole but a true chiasmus only at its very core. While it cannot be established whether McGahern was fully cognizant of Hemingway's style and whether he later became at all familiar with the argument of Max Nänny's 1997 article that first outlined the American author's technique of

framing paragraphs and whole stories by means of arranging words in a certain order, it is nevertheless remarkable how akin McGahern's prose constructions are to those by Hemingway.

4 Apart from utilizing the chiasmus as a means of shaping his fiction McGahern, both in his novels and his short stories, betrays a constant awareness of man's mortality and regards life, as several critics have pointed out, very much like Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain* (1924) or Vladimir Nabokov in *Invitation of a Beheading* (1947), as a brief crack of light between looming walls of darkness (cf. Prusse 2001: 136). This particular perception again refers to a circular process as day and night follow each other and provide a further cycle. The interplay of light and darkness is another common element that links the three stories under discussion and it is, in general, a recurrent feature in McGahern's fiction. Already in his first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), the ritual lighting of a lamp provides a frame for the whole narrative when the boy inquires of his mother and his father, respectively, whether it is time to light the lamp yet (7/232). The significance of light with regard to the writer's understanding of human lives can be further corroborated with a quotation from *Memoir* (2005) where he states:

We grow into an understanding of the world gradually. Much of what we come to know is far from comforting, that each day brings us closer to the inevitable hour when all will be darkness again, but even that knowledge is power and all understanding is joy, even in the face of dread, and cannot be taken from us until everything is. (36)

5 In *Memoir* McGahern thus appears to elucidate on (and possibly to soften) what a number of critics have described as his bleakness, "his vision of the lives of quiet desperation, which are lived out" in Ireland (Deane 223). The themes inherent in the stories under discussion also resound in McGahern's novels but, arguably, they find their most poignant expression in his short fiction. Denis Sampson even singled out "Gold Watch" as a key narrative in the author's *œuvre*, containing "the essence of his technique," and selected a quotation from it for the title of his monograph on McGahern, *Outstaring Nature's Eye* (xiv). The story is, as mentioned above, a variation on the theme of coming home to a father who is a family tyrant: exhibiting a number of weaknesses, this patriarchal figure is, in many facets, strongly reminiscent of McGahern's own father. The narrative could thus be said to conform most closely to the terms of autobiography but for the fact that McGahern himself was firm and outspoken in his criticism of autobiographical writing and, from a general point of view, considered its quality to be questionable (Gonzales 20). He regularly emphasised that the artist's inspiration might be taken from real life but that it had to grow and be formed before acquiring and deserving the label of art (McGahern 1998). By focusing on the "bitter generational estrangement" between father and son McGahern's "Gold Watch" reiterates an archetypal pattern that is established as early as "Wheels", the very first narrative in his first volume of short stories, *Nightlines* (cf. Sampson 89).

6In “Gold Watch” the first person narrator encounters an acquaintance from university days in Grafton Street in Dublin and falls in love with her. They move in together and then first visit her family in Kilkenny, a visit that goes passably well. His partner is less convinced, uttering a characteristic McGahern quip, namely that “the best part of these visits is always the leaving” (212). Predictably the visit to the narrator’s father and his stepmother, Rose, is far less amiable and eventually it is only the son on his own who sticks to the annual visits in the haymaking season. During one of those stays he comes across an old gold watch, which he remembers from his boyhood, and he claims it, somewhat guiltily, as his heirloom. When the narrator and his partner decide to get married he chooses not to inform his father and Rose; they pay him back by keeping the information from him that they will no longer cut the hay themselves but have leased their meadows to another farmer. The narrator thus travels in vain to their countryside farm. Since his wife is pregnant he is aware of this being his last haymaking holiday. He makes his father a gift of an expensive, modern gold watch as a replacement for his heirloom and then discovers that his father has immersed the new watch in the barrel, in which he prepares the poison to spray the potatoes. The key symbol at the heart of the story is, of course, the working of time – in favour of the narrator since he is young while his father is getting on in life – and how the father attempts to stop time by poisoning its symbol, the watch. The means of his attack on the timepiece moreover alludes to the poison that is corroding the last strings between father and son; the narrative then ends in an open-ended manner with the narrator’s musing on “time that did not have to run to any conclusion” (225).

7The first and last visit of the narrator’s partner, “a far worse disaster than I could have envisaged,” is *extremely* carefully set down in prose and the small paragraph that describes the couple’s arrival at the farm encapsulates all of the writer’s art :

I saw him watch us as I *got out of the car to open the iron gate* under the yew, but instead of *coming out* to greet us he withdrew into the shadows of the hallway. It was my stepmother, Rose, who *came out* to the car when we both *got out and were opening the small garden gate*.
(213, italics mine)

8If arranged in space the core of the story – the father’s barring himself in his home, simultaneously making social intercourse difficult – is spelled out in the chiasmic arrangement of the vocabulary in this particular paragraph:

1 got out ... to open the iron gate

2 coming out

he withdrew into the shadows of the hallway

1. came out

1 got out and were opening the small garden gate

9While the son and his partner move towards the father, even open the gate themselves, the old man actively steps back and hides in the dark corridor of the house. The chiasmus frames the sentence that contains the central action which contains the essence of the story, namely the father's active withdrawal into the symbolic shadows, thus consciously cutting the communication between himself and his son as well as the latter's future wife and their prospective children. The painful relationship between father and son is utterly revealed and the disastrous ending of the visit (caused by the parent's rude remarks) and of the whole narrative is clearly foreshadowed. The figure of the father in "Gold Watch" can actually also be read as a preliminary sketch of Moran in *Amongst Women* since the narrator's father, very much like Moran in the novel, is just as adept at manipulation, for instance by making use of "silence and politeness like a single weapon" (214).

10The significance of light and darkness in "Gold Watch" has already been alluded to above in the context of the father's retreating into the shadows. Although the moment of final awareness that the protagonist moves towards is mediated by the moonlight, it is set in the contrasting dark during the night, another typical aspect of McGahern's fiction (cf. for instance the narrator's epiphany which occurs in the darkness of the lavatory in "Korea"). Here are the narrator's thoughts as he contemplates the watch in its barrel of poison:

I stood in that moonlit silence as if waiting for some word or truth, but none came, none ever came; and I grew amused at that part of myself that still expected something, standing like a fool out there in all the moonlit silence, when only what *was* increased or diminished as it changed, became only what is, becoming again what *was* even faster than the small second hand endlessly circling in the poison.(225; italics mine)

11The pattern of the repetitions can again be perceived as chiasmic if the text is represented as below and the semantic analogies of "waiting for some word or truth" and "expected something" are rated as equivalents:

1. moonlit silence

2 waiting for some word or truth

but none came, none ever came; and I grew amused at that part of myself that still

2 expected something

1 moonlit silence

12 Yearnings and unfulfilled expectations belong to the existential emotional state that haunts the inhabitants of McGahern's fictional universe but it is uncommon that a protagonist becomes actually aware of and indeed perceives the irony of this mode of behaviour. The quotation ends with the telling symbol of time, "the small second hand [of the watch] endlessly circling", and thus McGahern brilliantly illustrates the message of that last phrase with the circular positioning of the words in the first part of the paragraph. It also relates back to a previous statement by the protagonist's father who, on receiving the watch, rhetorically asks: "What use have I for time here any more?" (223). The chiasmic constructions continue right towards the end of the story; in the last paragraph there is another one:

Before going into the house this last night to my room, I *drew the watch up* again out of the barrel by the line and *listened to it tick*, now purely amused by the expectation it renewed – that if I continued to *listen to the ticking* some word or truth might come. And when I finally *lowered the watch back down* into the poison, I did it so carefully that no ripple or splash disturbed the quiet, and time, hardly surprisingly, was still running; time that did not have to run to any conclusion. (225; italics mine)

13 In this excerpt the chiasmus is not a mere repetition of words but includes semantic opposites ("drew up" and "lowered ... back down"). In the last two lines the pattern is one of simple repetition, emphasizing McGahern's insistence on the impact of the passing of time on human lives and relations, functioning in a similar mode as the concluding couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet. The specific construction of this paragraph as outlined above may well provide an explanation for the poetic quality of McGahern's prose that has been noted by a number of critics, for instance by Fitzgerald (21) or Joel Conarroe (9). In the article that outlines his discovery of chiasmic constructions in Hemingway's prose Nänny comments that it is impossible to say whether the American writer consciously created the chiasmus or whether it was his poetic inspiration that guided him unconsciously towards placing the words in those particular positions (1997: 173; 1998: 183-184). This conclusion may just as well be transferred to the question regarding the degree of deliberation with which McGahern created his prose in this particular fashion. Illustrating his conception of the short story but without commenting on particular constructions the author stated in an interview that he gave in 1993 that the short story "has a very, very strict rhythm, and every word counts in it" (Louvel 28).

14 "Gold Watch" is also an interesting case regarding its publication history. First published in *The New Yorker* (17 March 1980), the story was, as both Sampson and David Malcolm have noted, first printed in book form in the American edition of *Getting Through* (1980), but for obvious reasons could not be included in the eponymous British edition (1978) – in Britain it was only published in book form in 1985, namely in McGahern's later story collection *High Ground* (Sampson

162; Malcolm 232). Furthermore, Malcolm stresses the fact that since the “story could fit equally well into two volumes of short fiction” this “is a sign of the persistence with which McGahern returns to the same locales and themes” (232).

15“Like All Other Men”, though containing autobiographical elements such as an early ambition to become a priest that is later thwarted, is an exercise in thematic and structural symmetry and hence one of the more “artistic” narratives. Sampson reads the construction of the narrative as “an intellectual arrangement, an ironic diagram” (205) while Malcolm understands it as “a story about male alienation” (231). Michael Duggan, who renounced priesthood because he lost his faith, has become a teacher of Latin and history in a country school. He travels to Dublin for the weekend where he meets Susan Spillane, a nurse by profession at a dance; after dancing, a few drinks and dinner they later spend the night together. In the course of getting dressed in the morning she reveals to him that she cannot see him again because she is about to join an Order and intends to spend the rest of her life in a convent.

16Michael, rather innocent and immensely pleased at finding a woman that appears to be everything he has dreamed of, should have been warned: Susan reacts to a story he tells her not with the laughter he expects but with the remark that it is “not hard to give the wrong signals in this world” (274). When the disappointed lover walks through Dublin he observes the river and the streets, and he notices how the scenery stretches “out in the emptiness after she had gone” (280). It is with a certain irony regarding their situation that he quotes the famous adage by Mary, Queen of Scots, “In my end is my beginning” (280). Susan leaves to become a nun and their lovemaking was her renunciation of the physical world in favour of the spiritual. The man, by contrast, then reverses the word order of the quotation, “In my beginning is my end” (280). This reversal rings rather hopelessly and is matched by his awareness in the last sentence of the story that whatever he will focus on, “it could only take him to the next day and the next” (280).

17According to McGahern’s papers at the National University of Ireland in Galway, the narrative was originally entitled “An End or a Beginning,” which the author next amended to “In My End” before settling on “Like All Other Men.” The final version carries, of course, as Sampson has remarked, echoes of the story of Samson and Delilah, who at last gives in to the request of his treacherous beloved and informs her that “if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any *other* man” (Judges, 16: 17). Michael Duggan is similarly afflicted – even though he does not lose his hair: “Once his sudden hope of marrying evaporates, he is left, like Samson, without his strength and purpose” (Sampson, 205). When the protagonist muses on his fate his thoughts have been shaped yet again by means of chiasmic structuring:

The river out beyond the Custom House, the straight quays, *seemed to stretch out in the emptiness* after she had gone. *In my end is my*

beginning, he recalled. *In my beginning is my end*, his and hers, mine and thine. It *seemed to stretch out*, complete as *the emptiness*, endless as a wedding ring. (280; italics mine)

1 seemed to stretch out ... the emptiness

2 my end is

3 my beginning

he recalled

3 my beginning

2 is my end

1 seemed to stretch out ... the emptiness

18 This is a further and particularly pleasing instance of McGahern's master craftsmanship since the words are placed in a circular position and thus symbolically form what the last two words of the paragraph refer to, namely a wedding ring. Moreover, as the narrator appears to imply, Michael Duggan's feelings of desolation could easily be matched by the analogous desolation of a marriage when two people no longer have anything to say to each other.

19 The thematic symmetry, a refugee from the seminary learning about love in a brief encounter with a refugee from the ordinary world, intent on seeking shelter in a convent is actually mirrored on the textual level. Many repetitions and further (almost) chiasmic arrangements, such as the following one, illustrate what is happening within the short story:

'Have you slept with anyone before?' he asked.

'Yes, with one person.'

'Were you *in love with him*?'

Yes.'

'Are you still *in love with him*?'

'No. Not at all.'

'I never *have*.'

'I know.' (276; italics mine)

20 This quotation shows how carefully McGahern shapes his dialogues. The whole exchange is framed by Michael's question and statement regarding sexual intercourse, beginning and ending with 'have'. It is followed by a double assertion which is itself framed by Michael's raising of the question of 'love'. The twice positively affirmed is then vehemently negated, the two 'yes' being counterbalanced by 'no' and 'not'. The ensuing paragraph confirms that the sample above is not the result of coincidence but part of McGahern's elaborate

construction of prose. “It was her *turn* to want to change the direction of the conversation. A *silence* fell that wasn’t a *silence*. They were unsure, their minds working furiously behind the *silence* to find some safe way to *turn*” (277, my italics). The silence, an important part in the training of nuns and priests, is here at the centre of their conversation, repeated three times and being framed by the word “turn” which illustrates what he has done and what she is planning to do: he turned away from the church while she, in turn, will join an Order.

21“Like All Other Men” is concerned with the passing of time that flies at the beginning – “Time raced” (273) – and ends with the philosophical contemplation of life as an eternity of suffering, “no matter how eagerly he found himself walking in any direction it could only take him to the next day and the next” (280). The narrative is also characterised by a subtle approach to light and darkness, as Paul Gueguen observes. Making use of one of his favourite devices, McGahern illustrates his philosophical contemplation of life as a flash of light in the darkness. Remarking on the gloomy atmosphere of the story, Gueguen points out that Michael has lost the divine light and hence stumbles blindly through life and Dublin whereas Susan is striving towards the light and thus takes the lead in their encounter (193). Her confidence is evident, as Gueguen notes on the same page, when McGahern describes her as standing “free of everything around her, secure in her own light” (278). Michael, lacking in confidence and nervous about his first sexual encounter, switches off the light, undresses and gets into bed; and yet, he cannot stay in the dark because Susan reproaches him: she wants “to see what I am doing” (275). In this narrative, again, the contrast of light and darkness contributes to McGahern’s vision of life in circular motion.

22In his third novel, *A Girl in the Head* (1967), the Anglo-Irish novelist J.G. Farrell portrays an old man who calls himself Count Boris Sladerewsky and pretends to be an impoverished, anglicized Polish nobleman, but who turns out to be, in fact, the Irish impostor Mick Slattery from Limerick. Boris grows old in a very undignified manner in the English seaside resort of Maidenhair Bay. One of his escapades involves making love to an under-age teenager in a boat; when he climaxes, Boris quotes the following lines from John Webster’s revenge tragedy *The White Devil*:

My soul, like to a ship in a black storm,
Is driven I know not whither. (140)

23Richard Farnham, the protagonist of McGahern’s long short story “The White Boat”, by contrast, is the opposite of Boris, both with regard to dignity and maturity. And yet, both of them have a few things in common: apart from the significant role of a boat in the two narratives this refers to the fact that both of them live in exile – Boris/Mick as an Irishman among Britons; Richard as an Englishman in Ireland, in Limerick to be more precise – and both of them have a lesson to learn. In Mick’s case this concerns accepting his age and learning to act accordingly; in Richard’s case it is a matter of addressing the relationship to his

wife – and he realises, as the last lines of the story indicate, that this will be “a kind of work he had never even attempted with any seriousness in the whole of his life up to now” (372).

24“*The White Boat*” is a philosophical narrative, contemplating life and, in particular, aging. Richard is aware of the new generation that will take over what once was his world: “He did not mind being pushed out on to the margins of this world. It was in the nature of things, and in many ways he was delighted with his new freedoms” (369). The protagonist thus perceives himself as part of a natural cycle – a significant aspect of McGahern’s fictional worlds. The white boat that Richard builds provides an escape for a certain amount of time and provides him with the space and time that he needs to meditate on his past, present and future, only to realise that his most important task awaits him at home, namely to get to know his wife properly and to live with her in the time that his retirement from business affords him. While the intertextual allusions to Farrell may be coincidental there are a number of clear links to McGahern’s own textual universe. As in “*Eddie Mac*” and “*The Conversion of William Kirkwood*” the narrative offers an outsider’s perspective on a closely-knit Irish world. Like the protagonist of “*The Conversion of William Kirkwood*”, Richard assimilates successfully into Irish society but does not have to face the same cost that Kirkwood is confronted with: people that matter to the latter, namely his foster child, Lucy, and her mother, Annie May Moran, will be forced out of his home once his new Irish wife comes to live there. Richard who has no major issues with his Irish environment realises that he has to put an effort into making the relationship to his wife work. Richard’s status as an outsider permits McGahern to include observations on Irish customs such as people’s reluctance “to say goodbye, as if it echoed too close for comfort each final parting” (370). With regard to father figures (cf. “*Gold Watch*”) the story contains a striking and rather unflattering portrayal of a Garda sergeant that resembles to the recurrent and well-known character that is partly based on McGahern’s father.

25The notion that a journey on a river may mirror a person’s development has long been established in narrative fiction. A well-known example in this respect is Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While young Huckleberry grows into maturity in the course of his journey *down* the Mississippi in the company of Jim, a runaway slave, Richard Farnham travels *up* the Shannon on his own from Limerick and since he is already at an advanced age, he is not growing more mature but nevertheless the journey advances him since he ends it when a revelation dawns upon him, namely that he is needed at home and has to begin the arduous task of reacquainting himself with his wife. His departure from home, almost an escape on his boat, only leads him back home again and thus provides a further example of the circular movements in McGahern’s fiction. The white boat that Richard Farnham builds may be an allusion to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55). There it is Frodo Baggins who is offered a passage on the White Ship that transports the Elves out of Middle Earth to the mystical Aman. By contrast to Frodo, who escapes the world where he has suffered so much,

Richard's passage on his boat is a short one, unaccompanied by suffering and guiding the protagonist towards accepting his task that lies before him and from which he is not allowed to sail away.

26The flooded fields that his boats traverses at the beginning of the narrative may symbolise the unlimited possibilities that retirement appears to grant to Farnham – his sticking to the riverbed may be read as a comment on his character. The white boat as such conveys a notion of freedom that is matched by Richard's white hair and yet, as the season during which the voyage is undertaken is winter, this indicates that time is running out and death is not that far off. In "The White Boat" McGahern also reasserts his particular perception of life as a flash of light when he has Richard reflect on his decision to convert to Catholicism which he does, merely, to be able to marry Mary Pat Meehan: "For years we grow towards the light, become part of that light for a time, and then the light fails. The child and the old often have more sense of the glory of that light than those in the flower or pulse of their life" (353). This growing towards the light only to be confronted with failure in the end is reminiscent of the mushrooms crowding towards a keyhole in Derek Mahon's poem "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" (1975). The train of thought is picked up again at a later point in the story when Richard Farnham reflects on the human condition: "We are born in night and travel through an uncertain day to reach another night" (369). In "The White Boat" light and darkness also play a central role with regard to another symbolic presence in the story: the bridge close to the place where the boat is anchored. The bridge links the two halves of the Irish town on the river (which bears a strong resemblance to the description of Cootehall in *Memoir*), and as such may refer to the aspects of his life that Richard has to join.

27Apart from the rather philosophical outlook on life – a flash in the darkness – it is evident in "The White Boat" that McGahern also uses chiasmic constructions when describing the bridge: "The drinkers *crossing the bridge* to Henry's *had seen it lit up* against the dark quay wall and *saw it in darkness* when they *crossed back* to their homes after midnight" (344; italics mine). If represented in space the chiasmic construction of this becomes evident and yet again shows how much effort McGahern put into conceiving the architectural dimensions of his prose:

1 crossing the bridge

2 had seen it lit up

against the dark quay wall

2 saw it in darkness

1 crossed back

28What is particularly striking here is how the boat is at the heart of this construction, underlining the symbolic significance of the white boat, and how

its textual positioning mirrors the way it is closely observed by the people going to the pub and coming back. The focal positioning of “lit” ahead of the words “dark” and “darkness” moreover underlines once more McGahern’s perception of human existence as a brief flash of light in the night.

29The significance of the bridge is also established in the following quotation, which consists of numerous repetitions that are not strictly governed by a chiasmic order. What is immediately noticeable, however, is the relevance of silence and noise, another contrast that infuses the narrative with meaning.

The first bell for Second Mass rang just before eleven. Voices and cars started to cross the bridge and gradually turned into a steady stream. When a number of cars crossed the bridge together they made a hollow sound. Most of the voices were on bicycles. All the cars and voices had ceased when the second bell rang out close to a quarter to twelve. One car driven very fast suddenly disturbed the settling silence. The silence of the village was intense. No dog barked, no cock crowed, a single cow mooed somewhere. He began to make sandwiches. After a long time, motors starting up around the church broke the silence; came closer; crossed the bridge. The voices followed. They sounded more animated now than the voices on their way to Mass. (366-367)

30Richard has to find a voice to bridge the silence between his wife and himself; and it is the silence he notices when alone on the boat that helps to bring the awareness of the necessity of talking to his wife – again symbolically underlined by the bridge that links two separate entities. As with the other symbolic themes this particular opposition is introduced into the story at an earlier point when the omniscient narrator observes a scene in the dayroom at the barracks where there is silence while the guards are waiting for a phone call – the noise of the telephone mirroring the earlier noisy cheerfulness of the chatting policemen (346).

31When he needs some provisions the protagonist of the story encounters in the person of Luke, the shopkeeper, someone who exhibits a similar kind of stoicism as Michael Duggan in “Like All Other Men”. Luke regards life with equanimity, even serenity: “The same day has to be put round somehow, no matter what” (348). Another parallel between these two stories lies in the deep convictions that the protagonists share: Richard Farnham’s pronouncement on “Culture, manners, gentleness ... Their time is never gone” (356) is an unconscious echo of Michael Duggan in “Like All Other Men” who proclaims: “I believe in honour, decency, affection, in pleasure” (277). These rather simple philosophical contemplations find their strongest expression in the discovery that the protagonist makes when considering his temporary home: “Here on this quay by this river there was such richness of water and light and stone and church and tree and people and all they reflected of life that he felt he could continue looking on them forever” (371).

32As a result of these considerations “The White Boat” emerges as a narrative that

deserves more attention than the brief sentence that Malcolm spares for it in his survey of McGahern's short fiction. The critic lumped it together with "Creatures of the Earth" and declared that both texts dealt with familiar topics, namely "death, coming to terms with age, and the intersection of modern and traditional Ireland" (233).

33The three stories discussed in this article illustrate that the three themes provided in its title are most certainly of relevance in McGahern's oeuvre. "Gold Watch" ends on an inconclusive note but implies that the son will break with his father; there is a tiny sign of hope in the happiness that the son has found in Dublin and the approaching birth of his own child. "Like All Other Men" appears to end in a rather bleak fashion: Michael Duggan realises the emptiness of life at moments of despair; whether his despair should be as eternal as he perceives it to be is a question left to the reader to contemplate. Last but not least "The White Boat" is the most optimistic of the three narratives since it ends with Richard realising that he needs to work on his relationship with his wife – a perception that provides hope for McGahern's characters and leaves the picture less bleak than in the previous stories. It is an impression that clashes with an earlier assessment by Cardin, who – to be fair – had not read "The White Boat" and argues that the typical protagonist in McGahern's short stories "ne progresse pas, mais revient toujours au point de départ" (1995: 184). Richard Farnham returns to his point of departure too – his home – but he clearly arrives there in a different state from the one he set out in, as a more advanced person. The same assessment might be made about McGahern's own biography, which started out in the Leitrim and Roscommon countryside but later took him to cultural centres such as London, Helsinki, Paris and New York. And yet he always returned to his native roots, the environment he grew up in, and eventually settled down in, namely on Foxfield, his farm in Co. Leitrim. His *Memoir*, the account of his childhood and growing up, is also in the form of a circle as the critic Stanley van der Ziel has pointed out, a circle that confirms the status of McGahern's last publication "as a deliberately shaped work of art" (467).

34It is particularly striking how the Irish writer utilizes the chiasmus as a stylistic tool to shape his prose in all three stories and thus, on the textual level, actually stresses the circular themes and symbols of his narrative fiction. McGahern thus can be said to be close to Hemingway in creating prose architecture (Nänny 1997: 158). Like the American author the Irishman conceives his texts as "poetic structurations" of "quasi-Palladian quality" that are hidden beneath the "seemingly simple, realistic prose" (Nänny 1997: 158). As if aware of such considerations McGahern himself readily admitted that his focus when writing was on the weighing of words:

You know that each words has a different weight, and what always fascinated me, even if you change a small word in a sentence, is that all the other words demand to be rearranged. And somehow, that can't be faked. Part of it is technique, but it's not all technique, otherwise it

could be faked but it can't be faked, because it actually needs, as Flaubert said, 'a strong feeling and clear thinking in order to find the right words' (Louvel 26)

35The function of this covert highlighting of certain words and phrases is most probably to shape a device that allows the author to "articulate an important concern or theme" and hence may provide "an interpretative clue to the understanding of a story" (Nänny 1998: 174). The short story as a genre is often perceived as poetry in prose. An awareness of the construction and the careful positioning of the words in the short fiction of both Hemingway and McGahern may certainly help to substantiate this claim. The fact that the thematic circularity of much of McGahern's short fiction is also mirrored on the textual level marks him out as a master of his craft who indeed successfully blends art, biography and philosophy.



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