

Childhoods in Irish Writing

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Abstract: *Childhood is a crucial stage of Irish life. It is the time in which essentials of Irish experience are nurtured, which will be developed later in a broader scope. Childhood is depicted as a universally important theme in all Irish writing, regardless of its artistic orientation towards traditional or counter-traditional. In traditional writing, childhood is depicted in the interactions between people and society. Protagonists are glimpsed actively living in realistic surroundings, among lively people. On the other hand, in counter-traditional writing, which is an artistically created universe, reality is replaced by fictiveness. Over an author's body of work there may be fixity and recurrence in protagonists and themes, to elucidate life's structure in a whole artistic perspective. Regardless of orientation, Irish writing invariably has influential roots in childhood, because childhood is where Irishness gains its essential foothold. This paper spotlights and elucidates childhood, investigating how it works as an influential element in forming protagonists in linkage with later life.*

I.

Irish writing is characterized by what is called *Irishness*, components of which include nationalism, Catholicism, and the love of place. Actually nowadays *Irishness* has difficulty in being maintained. However, it is still a substantial issue when we read Irish literature. In all fields everything changes over time, and must be reconsidered in a new light. Such is the case with *Irishness* also. Let's take childhood as an example. Childhood is a popular topic in Irish writing, which has taken it as a time in which specifically *Irish* experience takes place, which may later be supplemented or supplanted by wider experience. In traditional writing, childhood is represented through active interactions between people and society, while in counter-traditional writing it is interpreted through a stylized aestheticism. Consequently, there is a marked difference in expression between these two ways.

The past is remembered, and as it is replayed, it is transformed. Also memory is not continuous or coherent but rather discontinuous and erratic. When childhood is recalled, that stage of life is made independent and arbitrarily spotlighted. Many phases,

some of which are difficult to get through or progress from. However, childhood is characterized by a certain number of unifying specificities, *Irishness*, which integrates traditional Irish writing as a corollary. For instance, Colm Tóibín's protagonists are born from the Irish climate, as are John McGahern's and Colum McCann's. These writers are, in a sense, traditionalists. *Irishness*, even though it is not so powerful nowadays as in the past, is still influential in their protagonists' lives.

Characteristically, traditional writers depict childhood in the interactions between people and society while counter-traditional writers like John Banville and Ann Enright do not. It is natural that in the enclosed universe of counter-traditionalists' fiction, there is little or no interaction between protagonists and society. Traditionally, Irish childhood plays a significant role, moulding the lives of protagonists. It often happens that they have an unhappy childhood. "Had I had a happy childhood? No" (Éilís Ní Dhuibhne 93). The circumstances they are in are oppressive and restrictive. The protagonists think that their past, including childhood, is problematic, influenced by social and familial conditions. Restrictiveness is mentioned in the experience of Eamon Redmond:

Eamon went out to play, careful not to sit on the cold cement in case he got a cold, and not to get into fights. He was allowed to bring other boys into the house, but they had to play quietly. Often, when they left to go home and have their tea, he relieved. He had the house to himself again and could sit opposite his father and work at his lessons.(Tóibín 1992. 14-15)

Protagonists are also characterized by their being outsiders. Eamon found himself estranged from his cousins, Helen (Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship*³) was not like an ordinary girl, Brian Tierney (Brian Moore's *An Answer from Limbo*) was a black sheep of his family, and so on. Signs of later predicament are already apparent in their childhood. Also with Brian Moore himself, childhood determined his later life. Moore lived in different places through his life. As a writer, he depicted the places he lived later in contrast with the place of his childhood, Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland situation serves as a background in depicting Sheila Redden (Brian Moore's *The Doctor's Wife*) at a turning point of her life. Sheila runs away from home. Away from the soured memory of childhood, Brian Tierney goes to America.

The protagonists search for their identity, which is closely tied to Irish history. They may have ambiguous feelings about history and their birth. *A Second Life* by Dermot Bolger and *Songdogs* by Colum McCann are works in which writers make birth the central theme. Their dubious birth is the dubious history of Ireland, in which colonizers and colonized coexist and their cultures mix. In McCann's short story, "Fishing in the Sloe Black River," the complexities and their effects on the Irish are crystalized symbolically. Recreating a new idea from the old material of *Irishness*, the story becomes a parable. Childhood, which is generated happily or unhappily from indigenous climate as the protagonists grow, is followed by their turbulent adolescence. The present is

begotten from and is inseparably twined with past. Both stages of life must go along with and be affected by, time. However, some protagonists defy against this truth and try to preserve the past in eternal present. The mixture of the two tenses and freezing time are a usual method of novels. This exemplified in the protagonist *The Sea*, is *The Sea* by Iris Murdoch of *The Sea*. The protagonist, Charles Arrowby, tries to carry on his ideal of his love of Hartley. Due to the unnaturalness of his ideal, the story turns out a frustration.

In ordinary human affairs humble common sense comes to one's aid. For most people common sense *is* moral sense. But you seem to have deliberately excluded this modest source of light. Ask yourself, what really happened between whom all those years ago? You've made it into a story, and stories are false.'

(At this point Titus, who could bear it no longer, surreptitiously seized a piece of ham and some bread.)

'And you are using this thing from the far past as a guide to important and irrevocable moves which you propose to make in the future.' You are making a dangerous induction, and induction is shaky at the best of times, consider Russell's chicken – (355)

Things in childhood are involved in things happening now. Time sequence is often ignored in novels. The tendency is prominent in Irish literary writing.

Some of the protagonists want to estrange themselves from the native country. They make exiles of themselves. Emigration is a method by which they can get through life. A significant turning point, emigration sometimes seems to solve the problems. However, it is difficult to say that it is a really happy solution. Many do not emigrate but stay in Ireland. Colm Tóibín's protagonists are products of the time and the place. In his Irish-based novels, Tóibín's protagonists reveal how the Irish lived in Ireland from the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. They show themselves to be born from the time. McGahern represents the time with superb precision and relevancy. He is called a regionalist. McGahern, Tóibín, and McCann write of returning natives after estrangement from their country. Katherine Proctor of Tóibín's *The South*, after a long exile in Spain, returns to Ireland. She did not have a happy childhood. She was an Anglo-Irish descendant. One memory which is reverberated is the day when she suffered persecution when her family was burned out of their house:

An image came to her constantly of a child running for help, running for her life, being run through with bullets, while the thunderous sound of a fire roared in the background' (85).

After a long time experiencing upheavals in Spain, she returned to Ireland. She finds herself in a country unknown to her and tries to readjust herself to it. Time changes

everything, and protagonists must remould themselves. They reconcile with the past and their childhood is integrated into the whole scale of their life.

II

Banville's writing is free of all specificities of Irishness and can be read as an art born anywhere on the earth. His transcendental writing embodies what Bhabha (1994) mentions about the contemporary tendency of literature:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

The themes and motifs Banville extracts from Irish experiences are radically innovated through experimental usage of words. From the start, Banville is detached from Irishness. Even *house* or *family*, which is essential to Irish literature, is totally differentiated from a usual Irish one. The house he depicts is inhabited by ghosts. House is usually full of ghosts in the sense that memories of the past are there. However, Banville's ghosts are rather aesthetic, waiting to be made into art. They are analyzed and are adjusted to the writer's plan as any other material of his is. Counter-traditional writing, in which objects are entirely controlled by the writer, is unfamiliar to Irish writing. McGahern or Tóibín would not have allowed intellectual musings to occupy such a vast space. Nor would any other traditional writer. Banville's narrator plays Janus roles. He is the self, as both subject and object, who writes and is written about. The book is written by him, who is seen writing. When he says that he is not here and may be somewhere else, he expresses the complex situation of the artist. Ironically the narrator has not established the self, who is "a bag of slack flesh in a world drained of essence". (Banville 1991. 99). The undefined self cannot be anything especially Irish. Childhood, which is the time he faces, vacillating between uncertain past and future, is the time which is bereft of any Irish specificities. The description of the self or time shows that Banville's writing is not Irish specificity but generalized ideas.

One protagonist of Banville's books says that childhood is entirely fictional, a time of "somehow indestructible treasures nestling at the heart of the world." (Banville 1997. 31). To the protagonist, who so often finds himself returning to childhood, the past seems always present, where memory and imagination merge and "confused soft noises mingle in the air...it will remind you of somewhere else, a meadow, with poppies, beside a dusty road." (Banville 2000. 137). The meadow is any meadow and poppies are any poppies in the

world. These things are seen by the self. Childhood is recollected through senses: “I am always strangely moved by the smell of exhaust fumes on the morning air. ...A swagger stick: Why is it, I wonder, that the sea smells of tar? ...Life is full of mysteries” (Banville 2000. 13). As childhood is described sensuously, so the body of the protagonist is also perceived neutrally: “this strange, soft, breathing body in which my spinning consciousness was darkly trapped” (Banville 1998. 34). Childhood in Banville’s novels is a nucleus which does not change in ever expanding stylistic structure of ever increasing verbal experiment. It is on its own without being interacted with from outside. On the other hand, childhood in traditional writing is bred and is growing through the interactions with the surroundings. In both ways of depicting childhood, it childhood is the watershed where harmony is broken and is inseparably combined with the sense of loss. It is gone forever and we hear Helen’s lament: “My childhood is gone forever” (Tóibín 1999. 73). She knew her father died before her grandmother came to tell it to her. In her bed, she felt that her childhood was over.

The childhood depicted by traditionalists is wider scoped in the interactions between humans and society than that depicted by counter- traditionalists. A ten-year-old child’s experiences cannot help piloting his later life. Eamon Redmond, Tóibín’s (1992) protagonist, stayed with his relatives during the civil war. In the countryside where he lived, he experienced sex for the first time. After the deed, he was attacked by a sense of guilt, and when he came back to Enniscorthy, he soon went to the church to confess. Readjusting and conforming himself to social conventions, he reconstructed his life, to his relief. Childhood in traditionalists’ writing is temporal and spatial, closely related with the time when and the place where it is written. McGahern’s protagonists were all born in the early twentieth century when Irish tradition was still solid enough, although modernization was already incipient. The protagonist of *The Dark* (1965) was rigorously punished for answering back to his father. His course of life seemed to be fixed when he got a scholarship and studied at a university. However, he did not continue with the clerical profession, but instead, he made a pilgrimage in which he might find a new direction. At the end of the book, which is open-ended, his new direction is just a suggestion. His childhood, inseparable from Irish climate, is unhappy, but is accepted by him, as is seen in the reconciliatory ending of the book. In McGahern’s last book, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, (2001) he has finally arrived at an apparently more settled stage, as we find direct references to childhood absent. Instead he concentrates on the opposite extremity of life, depicting an idyllic rural existence in which paganism is not far beneath the surface. In fact, this may shadow his memories of his own earliest existence, but such is not referred to explicitly.

III

The love of place is another constituent of Irishness. In traditional writing, people are depicted as being grounded in areas or places. Childhood memory is inseparable from places, real and imaginary. Places in books are real and at the same time unreal,

because they are recreated from reality. However, there is a difference between places, as depicted by traditionalists and counter-traditionalists. In traditional writing, place and time are ruled by reality while with counter-traditionalists, place and time are just single dimensions, not an interactive area. With them, everything is renovated in space imagery. Body is a space, which is analyzed as an instrument and is spatially expanded. Like cubist painting, the body is deconstructed and seen from various angles. A fantastic usage of space carries us away into another dimension, like the wardrobe of C.S.Lewis' *Narnia*. With Banville, the landing at the top of the stairs is frequently the entrance to childhood, to another fictional world, and there fabulous play of words and ideas is glimpsed. Windows, rooms, garden as well as landing, constitute space that frames and defines a painting in words.

In Moore's case, childhood, as Sampson (1999) suggests, was a frustrating time to him. At home he was reigned over by his father and could not conform to social and familial conventions, which gave him the sense of guilt, and his desire to leave his country was nurtured. At school and at home he found himself as outsider. One day he was badly bullied at school, because he said he would become a writer.

You may remember how a much larger audience assembled as I was dragged to the school drinking fountain, ducked under it and held until water ran down my spine, dripped into my trousers trickled down my skinny legs to fill my socks and shoes. You may remember that, after my duckling, I was forced to read my essay once more. Your motives were just, I suppose. You wanted to knock the pretensions from under me, to teach me the lesson I have been too long in learning. But I learned nothing. Soaking wet, my clothes torn, I read my essay, but with pride now, screaming out that I would do everything I had promised in it. And all of you, watching my pale face and trembling shoulders, hearing the true fanatic in my thin defiant scream, all of you turned away, uneasy of me. Because conviction – even a wrong conviction – makes the rest of us uneasy. For the first time in my life I had won. My own unsurety died and for the remainder of my years at school I grew in the wind of your disapproval. Your doubts that day made me a victim – the victim I still remain – of my own uncertain boast.

For I did not become great. I had no vocation for greatness. (32)

The incident proved traumatic through his life, and in his book he refers to it again and again. Childhood followed by adolescence left him in further frustration, which is represented in Moore's *An Answer from Limbo*. Emigrating to America, the protagonist swears to become a writer. Through hard American life, his bitter childhood memory is incessantly remembered, and eventually leads him to cruelly treat his mother, who came to live with him. The consistency with which he tried to adjust himself to his dream since his childhood is not fulfilled.

IV Conclusion

Childhood is an especially important topic for contemporary Irish writers. traditional as well as counter-traditional writers make use of the topic. In a transitional time like now, it is important for writers to know where they are situated. Whether they emigrate or stay at home, they must return to childhood to know what made the self. Childhood is the starting point, in which the self is formed. Whether it is formed in the interactions with the outside world, or is formed within the fiction, depends upon the character and situation of the writer, who makes the decision. This investigation has attempted to summarize an aspect of Irish writing during the past decades, indicating where writers are situated. A new contemporary- age sensibility is represented by counter-traditionalists, while Irish sensibility is solidly maintained with refreshing new angles by traditionalists. In both cases, Irish childhood has equipped, and will equip, them with ample influential and productive resources.

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