View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by OpenEdition

Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

53 | Autumn 2009
The Short Stories of John MacGahern

Violence and ontological doubt in "The stoat"

Danine Farquharson

Édition électronique
URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1009
ISSN : 1969-6108

Éditeur
Presses universitaires d'Angers

Édition imprimée
Date de publication : 1 décembre 2009
ISSN : 0294-04442

Référence électronique
Danine Farquharson, « Violence and ontological doubt in "The stoat" », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [En ligne], 53 | Autumn 2009, mis en ligne le 01 décembre 2010, consulté le 30 avril 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1009

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 30 avril 2019.

© All rights reserved

Violence and ontological doubt in "The stoat"

Danine Farquharson

1 "The Stoat" has a fascinating textual history. Originally published as the fifth short story in John McGahern's 1978 collection *Getting Through*, it was substantially revised for inclusion in the 1992 *Collected Stories*. Over a decade later, the story is deleted from 2006's *Creatures of the Earth* – the "new and selected" collection put together just before the author's death. A possible reason for removing "The Stoat" from the last collection is articulated in McGahern's preface to *Creatures*: "there were two particular stories I rewrote several times, but I was never satisfied with them [...] I was too attached to the material. [...] central parts of both these stories were essential to the description of the life we lived with my father in the barracks, from which they should never have been lifted" (vii).[1] That McGahern was dissatisfied with the story is obvious and literary critics seem to agree with McGahern's verdict. There is no sustained critical attention to the story: Denis Sampson, David Malcolm and Eamon Maher grant "The Stoat" but brief mention in their book-length studies of McGahern.[2] But such dissatisfaction, both authorial and critical, makes "The Stoat" all the more intriguing given the conventional wisdom that all of McGahern's writing can be read as an "organic whole" (Sampson, *Outstaring* xi). Sometimes those elements of a whole that do not seem to fit are most revealing. The following analysis of "The Stoat" (after an obligatory plot summary) shall outline dominant themes in McGahern criticism that are relevant to the story, then detail some of the revisions McGahern made toward the *Collected Stories* version, then offer a close textual reading of the stoat/rabbit allegory – all by way of presenting "The Stoat" as a beguiling but peculiar story that nonetheless performs an important role in the organic whole of McGahern's fictional opus.

2 "The Stoat" opens with the protagonist golfing. In the middle of a stroke, he hears crying in the rough grass and upon investigating finds a rabbit freshly and mortally wounded by a stoat. The protagonist observes blood "pumping out on the sand" and so he finishes the kill (*Collected Stories* 152). He then concludes the hole, but gives up the game and heads to

the rented cottage where he and his father are staying. This violent preface leads into the plot of the father seeking a second wife (one Miss McCabe) and the failure of that quest. The plotline is notably autobiographical.

3 In *Memoir*, McGahern tells of his father "sporadically trying to get himself married":

> [. . .] we were drawn into some of these adventures because of his insistence that he was marrying for our good. It took him several years. Much of what took place was both sad and funny. The closest he came to marrying at this time was to a Miss McCabe, a small, gentle woman, a principal of a school" (180)

4 The failed engagement in "The Stoat" closely follows McGahern's recollection of this similar moment in his life. When marriage seems inevitable, McGahern and his siblings meet Miss McCabe several times and she plans "to spend the holidays with [them] at Strandhill" (*Memoir* 180). The family rents their usual bungalow but Miss McCabe stays at the Golf Links Hotel. One day a porter comes from the hotel with a message that "Miss McCabe had a 'turn' in the seaweed salt baths that morning. She had been seen by a doctor and was resting in a bedroom." "My father", continues McGahern, "assumed that the turn was a heart attack. The effect was startling" (181). Just as in "The Stoat", McGahern's father abandons any idea of marrying Miss McCabe, packs everything and leaves the son to close up the bungalow. McGahern visits Miss McCabe, apologizes, but is left with "a strange, uncomfortable feeling [...] recognized now as both unease and shame" (*Memoir* 182). The location, the names, the golfing, the bungalow, the hotel porter, and the father's reactions are all maintained from life into fiction. "The Stoat" adds an uncle to the mix: a successful Dublin doctor who serves as a parallel or surrogate father to the young protagonist (also studying to be a doctor).[3] That detail is the only significant plot addition to the biographical tale – except the rabbit and the stoat. However, what is far more interesting to me than the closeness of the short story to the lived life is the way in which McGahern fictionalizes this episode.

Critical perspectives

5 Many eminent critics of John McGahern's work comment that his œuvre moves toward a single, coherent, unified whole. Richard Lloyd suggests that McGahern's work is "a continuum of characters and themes" (6), Declan Kiberd notes that McGahern's novels "read as a single, longer novel, a continuum of characters and themes" (6), and most persuasively Denis Sampson argues, "his work is an organic whole" (*Outstaring* xi). The repeated use of Roscommon and Leitrim settings, the violent fathers and complicated sons, and the hallmark realism coupled with symbolist gestures and fable elements (Grennan 18-19) provide ample evidence that each fictional world of John McGahern is part of one world being created and recreated. However, a key factor in all discussions of the wholeness of McGahern's work is an organicism: the movement, the rhythmic changes, the repetitions with subtle modification. Indeed, McGahern is well known as a reviser of his own fiction: "He is like a Renaissance painter, constantly working on the same canvas, polishing and improving it as he gains in experience and confidence" (Maher, "Crisis" 63). Not surprisingly then, a third commonality in much McGahern criticism (after the wholeness and the revision) is the element of tension in his work. Grennan sees one significant tension between a kind of nihilism "towards acknowledging 'the ferocious ruthlessness of life'" and "towards some benevolent, positive belief in the goodness of things" (16); Sampson continuously works with what he rightly sees as

McGahern’s drama of opposites: “yearning and loss, desire and defeat, beginnings and endings, departures and returns” (“The Rich Whole” 27) culminating in a “fusion of frailty and hardness” (*Outstaring* xiv); and, McKeon notes “a tension between desire and resentment, which, in the fiction, is a stumbling block to the achievement of a certain ‘calm’ or ‘stillness’” (78). Thus, a critical view emerges of an artist struggling with the “general conditions of being, with how life is lived and has to be lived” (Crotty 42). McGahern is a writer “searching for ways of perceiving the spiritual essence in everyday experience” (Maher, “Crisis” 61), but one who will never be able to achieve absolute clarity or completeness. McGahern’s “vision of life’s essential movements” cannot “be understood by human intelligence or [be] explained in terms of socio-historical formations” (Sampson, “Open” 136) and so the “grail of the ‘rich whole’ will constantly evade him” (Maher, “Crisis” 61).

6 The ontological questions that inform John McGahern’s fiction, the “quest for an indefinable (some)thing, an explication of people’s fundamentally unfulfilled condition and of life itself” (Goarzin 30), cannot be fully answered any better than the tensions can be resolved. As Belinda McKeon recognizes in her work on his novels, “the action that breaks through again and again to render impossible this stillness is always an action of anger or violence” (78). Because violence pervades the life and the fiction of John McGahern,[4] I contend that the violence with which “The Stoat” begins cannot be successfully integrated into any worldview, any perception of being that is complete or whole. The shock of the killing, the rupture of the rabbit’s body, the spilling of blood into the sand, all create an ontological wound that needs to be healed, but that cannot be satisfactorily eradicated. This inability to fully close the wounds of violence is replicated in the protagonist’s attempt to read the human world and human relationships in terms of an animal fable or allegory. The stoat/rabbit tale does not fit perfectly the young man’s relationship with his father nor does it fit the father’s sadly comic relationship with Miss McCabe. In the end, the protagonist is lost, displaced and not at home in any sense. Just as his naïve recourse to the natural world of predator/prey fails to answer his ontological questions, so he fails to fit into any of the human worlds presented: the golf course, the world of Dublin doctors, or the world of his father.

7 This *mis-fit* or displaced character is precisely another running concern of McGahern's that interests critics. In his discussion of *Getting Through*, the collection of short stories that has the first version of “The Stoat”, Denis Sampson notes that estrangement is a key motif in the collection, most notably articulated in “The Beginning of an Idea,” and that estrangement is “from oneself due to excess self-consciousness and guilt” (*Outstaring* 165). Focusing on children in McGahern’s fiction, Patrick Crotty finds a similar trend: “His writing tends to seek out the inadequate, the mis- and dis-placed, people whose unease in their particular circumstances is emblematic of a more general dilemma. An inability to fit unselfconsciously the situations in which they find themselves” (44). Further, Eamon Grennan sees a “sense of belonging” as “everywhere one of the poles of his and his characters’ imaginations” (25). What connects all these observations of not belonging is the element of self-consciousness. Sampson’s analysis of “The Beginning of an Idea” and other short stories hits upon what is a vital aspect of my reading to follow: “the central consciousness in all his fictions is an aspect of the artist, in each case endeavoring to match material and angle of vision in a different way” (“Introducing” 7). The protagonist of “The Stoat” is an artist manqué, attempting to “match material” from his life to an

"angle of vision" embodied by the rabbit and the stoat, but that attempt fails to provide any "rich" wholeness of perception or interpretation.

8 Finally, and perhaps most importantly for my interpretation of "The Stoat," critics also agree that style and structure are more important in understanding McGahern's fiction than plot or characterization. Taking their cue from McGahern himself, critics note that McGahern is reluctant to discuss any particular theme but steers conversations toward "aesthetic and procedural priorities" (Crotty 42). McGahern's now canonical contemplation of writing in "The Image" is worth quoting at length here:

> When I reflect on the image two things from which it cannot be separated come: the rhythm and the vision. The vision, that still and private world which each of us possesses and which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm – rhythm being little more than the instinctive movements of the vision as it comes to life and begins its search for the image in a kind of grave, grave of images of dead passions and their days. (12)

9 Image, rhythm, vision: these elements of fiction are far more interesting to McGahern and many of his critics than action, plot, character. He is more concerned with "the quality of writing" than any plot or setting distinctions (Maher, "Crisis" 69). Remarkably, "The Stoat" has an arresting image of a rabbit being stalked by the predatory stoat and that image is conspicuously repeated at the end of the story. After looking at the textual history of "The Stoat" to highlight the organics of the story's production, my reading will focus on this repeated image of violence in terms of an ontology that leaves both narrator and reader in a position of doubt and dislocation.[5]

Textual Variants

10 "The Stoat" dramatically changes between its publication in *Getting Through* (1978) and its altered form in *Collected Stories* (1998). The complete details of the variants, the "trimming and repunctuation," must wait for the inevitable variorum edition of McGahern's work (Miller 19). However, I will consider four major sets of revisions. The most obvious change, clear from the first sentence of the story, is a shift from third-person narration in *Getting Through* to first person narration in the later version.[6] "A long-legged student in a turtleneck was following a two-iron he had struck" (*GT* 58) becomes "I was following a two-iron I had struck" (*CS* 152). The shift in narrative point of view pulls the tale into the personal and private and away from the potential distancing effects of third-person narration. While shifts in narrative perspective internal to McGahern's early novel *The Dark* are seen as signaling a "lack of persistence in the narrator's way of seeing and thinking" (van der Ziel 104), the external change in "The Stoat" brings the story into the realm of self-consciousness that above-mentioned critics note. In spite of his namelessness, the "I" in the story is the central consciousness struggling to make sense of the world. Another result, among many, of the revised narrative point of view is a diminishing of characterization detail. The *CS* version has no description of the protagonist's turtleneck and he is only identified as a medical student later in the story. The deletion of the detail of his "long legs" is matched by a similar deletion about the stoat. In the first paragraph of the *GT* version, the stoat is described as having a "long grey body" and in the *CS* version the stoat is merely "grey" (152). By and large the revised story relies less on explicit physical descriptions, less on expository detail than on the allegorical image of the rabbit and the stoat. By removing both instances of "long" in the first paragraph – instances that would have clearly linked the protagonist to the stoat –

McGahern subtracts any definitive association of the narrator with the predatory stoat. As I will discuss later, the ambiguity around the allegorical associations of the animals and the human characters is fundamental to the ontological doubt in "The Stoat".

11 Another elemental change is related to the uncle. In *Getting Through*, the uncle appears more than once and at greater length. For example, the uncle and protagonist have a long walk and conversation where the young man asks: "You don't like my father much?" (*GT* 64), and the uncle offers a view of the father – "I find him dull" (64) – that is only hinted at in the revised version. Further, the uncle's affection for the protagonist is obvious in the first edition: "You know, if your father does succeed in getting himself hitched, you'll be able to spend more time here. I'd like that" (*GT* 64). Equally explicit is the protagonist's returned affections: "He'd like that too. With his uncle everything seemed open" (*GT* 64). No such obviousness of their mutual admiration remains in the revised story. Additionally, the use of the uncle in the original version includes a scene that clearly constructs the protagonist as an artist-figure. After the debacle of the father running away from Miss McCabe, the protagonist notes that he and his uncle will have "good talk for several days, and there was the story of the stoat and the rabbit" (*GT* 68). In *Getting Through*, the animal allegory provides the protagonist with valuable narrative fodder for conversation with his uncle; the protagonist can partake in storytelling and mockery of the father. All of this detail is removed from the revised story in *Collected Stories*. The removal of such details makes the second version minimalist in comparison: it is far more subtle and far more ambiguous as a result.

12 The general removal of detail has another significance related to the rabbit and the stoat. There is an entire conversation between the young man and his father about feeding the dead rabbit to Miss McCabe in the first tale that is completely gone in the second. The son is presented as slightly perverse in *Getting Through* as he proposes to "skin and cook" the rabbit for Miss McCabe. The narrator describes the young student as having "no anxieties regarding Miss McCabe and the dinner; she would come even if a cow's head were in question, since by coming to the cottage to dinner she was drawing closer to the dream of her future life, of what she hoped to become" (*GT* 60). This passage is deleted in *Collected Stories*, removing the characterization of the son as cold and arguably cruel in his association of Miss McCabe as a predatory animal stalking a man for marriage. Again, the allegorical correspondences are far more ambiguous in the revised story.

13 Finally, the rabbit and stoat element is also revised in two different but equally significant ways. The son's approach and reaction to the dying rabbit in both second paragraphs is different, and the third paragraph of both stories (which remain word for word the same in both versions) is italicized when repeated at the end of the *GT* version but left in regular font in *CS*. This second paragraph describes the son's movement toward the "crying" he hears "in the rough grass above the fairway" (*GT* 58 and *CS* 152). The "wet slick of blood behind its ear" and "the body trembling in a rigidity of terror" remain the same. Also unchanged is the protagonist's realization that "never before did I [he] hold such terror in his hands." However, what happens next is different. The change is emblematic of the nature of McGahern's revisions to the story and worth considering at length. Here is the passage in the original story:

> Holding it up by the hind legs he killed it with one stroke, but when he turned it over he could find no mark other than where the vein had been cut. He took the rabbit down with him, picking his way more cautiously through the long grass than when he had climbed. He left the rabbit beside the clubs while he chipped and holed out, but as he crossed from the green to the tee he saw the stoat cross the

> fairway behind him. After watching two simple shots fade away into the rough, he knew he had lost his concentration, and decided to finish for the morning. As he made his way back to the cottage his father rented every August in Strandhill, he twice glimpsed the stoat behind him, following the rabbit still, though it was dead. (*GT* 58)

14 In this version, there is no doubt that the protagonist kills the rabbit (perhaps out of mercy). His lack of concentration results in giving up the golf and returning to the father, with the stoat both tracking the rabbit-prey and following the young man. As the protagonist then offers to skin and cook the rabbit for dinner, he is clearly presented as predator in the original story. Here is the revised segment of that second paragraph in *Collected Stories*:

> I stilled it with a single stroke. I took the rabbit down with the bag of clubs and left it on the edge of the green while I played out the hole. Then as I crossed to the next tee I saw the stoat cross the fairway following me still. After watching two simple shots fade away into the rough, I gave up for the day. As I made my way back to the cottage my father rented every August, twice I saw the stoat, following the rabbit still, though it was dead. (152).

15 The difference between "he killed it with one stroke" and "I stilled it with a single stroke" is profound in its myriad implications. Firstly, "still" is an ambiguous word implying either that the protagonist calms the trembling rabbit or that he kills the rabbit. The ambiguity then extends to the word "stroke" – meaning either a blow from the golf club or a caress. The result of the revision is a sexualization of the violence that is absent in the original story. Secondly, the repeated use of "stilled" increases the choric effect of the word "still" in this opening section of the story – is it used four times in the revision and the cumulative effect is one of both persistence (the stoat is following him "still") and deathly calm – to still a life. That choric "still" connects this image to McGahern's discussion of images with both the first person narrator bringing the reader into a "still and private world" and an image whose rhythm is undoubtedly marked by death and the "grave" ("The Image" 12). The revision is more in tune with what so many critics see as McGahern's use of repetition as ritual.[7]

16 The intensifying ambiguity in the revision extends to the fable-like allegory of the rabbit and the stoat. In *Collected Stories*, the narrator/protagonist appears to be both predator (as he kills the rabbit) and prey (as the stoat follows him). The narrator competes with the stoat for the rabbit, but he also gives up the golf and leaves for the cottage to escape the death scene. The paragraph that follows this scene is, as I mentioned, the same in both versions with one exception. The last paragraph in the *Getting Through* version, immediately following the son's thought that "there was the story of the stoat and the rabbit" (68), is italicized – unambiguously signalling how the young man will tell the tale. The *Collected Stories* version contains no italics, no such obvious signal as to how to read the final paragraph. The changes made to the rabbit and the stoat scenes are vital not only because they are emblematic of the wholesale style of revision to "The Stoat" but also because the rabbit/stoat allegory is the mechanism through which the story needs to be interpreted. The reading to follow of "The Stoat" as it appears in *Collected Stories* will use the rabbit and the stoat as entry into a John McGahern short story about violence, displacement, questions of being, and the inability of story and metaphor to adequately answer those questions.

The Stoat and the Rabbit[8]

17 The assertion that "so many of McGahern's stories have a solidly realistic superstructure on a scaffolding composed of what can only be described as moral fable" (Grennan 18) is a good place to begin a close reading of "The Stoat." If the story can be seen as an animal fable or allegory, then Declan Kiberd's observation about *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is pertinent: "Nature is a beautiful foreground which creates – long before it reflects – the human mood" (166). While the description of the dying rabbit in the opening paragraphs of "The Stoat" is far from "beautiful," it does reflect – and support – the "human mood." The mood created in the first few paragraphs is dominated by violence. The rhythmic repetition of words such as "follow" and "still," in addition to "blood" and "terror" amplified by the choric repetition of entire sentences and images, furnish the predator/ prey association that the narrator/protagonist will attempt to use to better understand his relationship with his father (and all relationships in the story). Interestingly, the narrator's use of the animal world to illuminate the world of human beings fails to adequately explain the father's behaviour. As a result of this failed ontological quest, the narrator begins and ends the story in the same position: displaced, alone, and lost as to his future. Tom Paulin closes in on this idea in his review of *Getting Through*: "McGahern constantly circles and returns" to a "haunting sense of absence, a feeling that something is wrong and missing in the lives of characters. This Chekhovian sense of absence becomes a means of exploring the theme of failure" (70). McGahern's revisions make the *Collected Stories* version one in which the reader must "follow" an increasingly symbolic tale and end with much the same feelings of abandonment and absence as the narrator. "The Stoat" is an animal fable, full of violence and loss, suggesting "that human beings 'know nothing'" (Miller 19).

18 "The Stoat" opens with the narrator golfing: "following a two-iron I had struck just short of the green when I heard crying high in the rough grass above the fairway" (152). The word "crying" was "screaming" in the first edition of the story, and this change to a more indefinite word signals doubt and ambiguity. While a scream is undeniably terrible, a cry indicates many things (a child can cry, a rabbit can cry, an adult can cry). Also signified in the first sentence is the narrator's isolation. He is golfing alone, which is unusual, and he is using a two-iron. The two-iron is a rarely used golf club; indeed, many golfers give up their two-irons and rely more on a five-wood. The use of golf terminology at the outset could additionally alienate readers unfamiliar with the language of the fairway.[9] The first sentence displaces the setting and the reader from any immediately recognizable location. The main character is also set apart, as the rising pitch of the crying draws him off the calm, manicured green of the golf course into the "rough grass."

19 The next sentence foreshadows the failure of the narrator to make sense of the death scene in which he is about to partake. The "light of the water from the inlet was blinding" (152) and references to seeing and sight and blindness will punctuate the entire story. At this moment, he is blind and that lack of (in)sight will remain. He does "not see the rabbit at once" and only spots the stoat when he is standing "over" the dying rabbit. The final sentence of this first paragraph removes the narrator from the banal setting of the golf course (with its semblance of calm contemplation) not only into the rough grass but into the violent allegory of predator and prey: "I was standing over the rabbit when I saw the grey body of the stoat slithering away like a snake in the long grass" (152). The snake

simile is prosaic and a first clue to the narrator's immature attempt to interpret the world in a meaningful or figurative way. The grisly death of the rabbit follows.

20 The narrator shifts from a follower of action to an actor in the drama of death in the second paragraph. "The rabbit still did not move, but its crying ceased. I saw the wet slick of blood behind its ear, the blood pumping out on the sand" (152). Sound imagery is replaced by visual; these two sentences colour the banal green and grey of the first paragraph with the running, pumping blood. Only later is it revealed that the narrator is a medical student (suggesting a schooled fascination with the functioning of a body or the body's death throe). However at this moment, his stooping down to pick up the rabbit is remarkable for the nature of his involvement – he kills the rabbit: "I stilled it with a single stroke." Even though that sentence can be interpreted as a caress to calm or a stroke to still the trembling body, more likely it is a connection between a golf "stroke" and the blow to the rabbit: both undeniably violent acts. The narrator could be killing the rabbit out of mercy, but he is here clearly linked to the predatory stoat. It comes as no surprise, then, that the father is introduced in the same paragraph. However, there is no consistent correspondence between animals and human characters in this story. The narrator will variously depict the father as both rabbit and pathetic stoat, and Miss McCabe as both predator and prey. Human beings cannot be explained by simple one-to-one animal allegories despite the narrator's desire to use the rabbit and the stoat relationship as paradigmatic. Even he is described as both: the stoat follows him "still" and the stoat follows "the rabbit still, though it was dead" (152). With the stoat following the narrator and the rabbit, it is easy to read the narrator as prey to be stalked. But his killing of the rabbit marks the narrator as violent like the stoat, no matter whether he kills out of mercy or not. The haunting spectre of the predatory slaughter is the mood for the entire story to follow, and the third paragraph – which is repeated word for word in the final lines of the story – offers the image through which to see that deathly mood. It is as if the narrator already views his father's search for a second wife as a stoat-like stalking of vulnerable prey. The action to follow, however, proves the narrator's vision to be, while not entirely blind, sadly inadequate.

21 Because of its reiteration at the end of "The Stoat" the third paragraph bears quoting in full.

> All night the rabbit must have raced from warren to warren, the stoat on its tail. Plumper rabbits had crossed the stoat's path but it would not be deflected; it had marked down this one rabbit to kill. No matter how fast the rabbit raced, the stoat was still on its trail, and at last the rabbit sat down in terror and waited for the stoat to slither up and cut the vein behind the ear. I heard it crying as the stoat was drinking its blood. (152)

22 McGahern's own contemplations in "The Image" highlight the importance of rhythm and vision. The rhythm of this passage is active: the animals race, slither and drink. But one of those emblematic McGahern tensions is also at work: the race and the hunt are set against the word "still" and the cessation of activity as the rabbit sits and waits. The use of that oft repeated word "still" signifies the marked determination of the stoat, and echoes back to the earlier lines where "still" indicated calm. The rhythm and vision of this all-important image is jarring: difficult to unpack, impossible to discern.

23 I confess an indulgence at this point in my reading: the first version of this passage includes one phrase that is eliminated in the *Collected Stories* edition. In *Getting Through*, the third person narrator makes it clear in the first sentence of this paragraph that the

whole image is a product of the protagonist's imagination. "All night the rabbit must have raced from warren to warren, *he thought*" (italics mine, 59). In the first edition of the story, the vision of this recurring image is undeniably part of the son's attempt to characterize and interpret the world. In the revised version, the image of the hunt is undoubtedly a vision of some kind, but it is not clear to whom the vision belongs. Even though the revised story is told in the first person and, by extension, this paragraph belongs to the world view (as embryonic as it may be) of the narrator, the effect in the revision is alienating or – to put a more positive spin on it – more symbolic. Whichever version is read, the effect of this image is to highlight that the stoat will succeed in its stalking and that the stoat feeds on the blood of its victim. When these animal behaviours are awkwardly transposed onto the narrator's human relationships, the father becomes vampiric (sucking the life blood out of all those around him), but he also becomes a rabbit running from the possibility of marrying Miss McCabe: "I saw that my father had started to run like the poor rabbit" (156). The narrator is not sophisticated enough to understand the impoverishment of his own metaphors or the inadequacies of any metaphor to fully explain the world.

24 But what of the rabbit? How does it behave? It races "from warren to warren" as if no dwelling is safe from the hunting stoat. Eventually the rabbit just sits down as if in surrender to the inevitability of its death. That the rabbit "waited for the stoat to slither up and cut the vein", suggests obedience to the mastery of the predator. However, the rabbit could be giving up – like the narrator gives up the golf game in the opening sentences – the rabbit could have lost its concentration and become hypnotized by the relentless pursuit of the stoat.[10] Even while racing from warren to warren seeking sanctuary (just as the father runs away from Miss McCabe and the narrator is displaced from any home), the rabbit is different from all human characters in the story: it dies. The narrator and his father and his uncle and Miss McCabe will all die eventually – just as assuredly as the rabbit is caught by the stoat. But the fear and "terror" the rabbit is deemed to experience by the narrator is transmuted into the *timor mortis* of the father. One might ask why the story is titled "The Stoat" and not "The Rabbit" for all the running away and fear in the characters. In order to answer that question, the father needs to be explored further.

25 The father is introduced reading "the death notices" in the paper, solidifying his association with dying. After "he had exhausted the news and studied the ads for teachers, he'd pore over the death notices again" (152): behaviour akin to the stoat's measured stalking of its prey and devouring of the blood. The father is not explicitly violent in this story, but his language is vicious in describing the women who answer his ad for companionship: "such a collection of wrecks and battleaxes" (154). He might feed on notices of death, but he also fears potential harm from a battleaxe. The father is depicted as uneasily akin to both the stoat and the rabbit. When the father comments on a colleague who has died, the son offers a symbolic gesture: "I held up the rabbit by way of answer" (153). The father is speaking of dead associates, he is ritualistically reading the obituaries and the son "by way of answer" holds up the dead rabbit. Is the son saying that everyone dies? Does the gesture say that the son can be both harbinger and agent of death? The rabbit does not actually answer for the deaths described and the deaths implied (the mother has died and the father is closing in on his own); rather, the slain rabbit is a *kind of* response, though paltry and derisory. The son is soon after linked to the rabbit when he says: "I just brought it. The crying gave me a fright" (153). The son is the

only character to openly admit to fear, analogous to the trembling rabbit's terror. The son, too, suffers from a fear of death but not his own.

26 He is both physically and ontologically ill at ease. Words and images associated with home, belonging, displacement and wandering occur throughout "The Stoat." The narrator is first described as "following" something, as if on the trail of important information, and what he finds is a dying rabbit. The rabbit is then imagined to have been racing from warren to warren (from home to home) before its final breath. Racing becomes "wandering" (a word suggesting lack of direction) in two passages. First, when trying to decipher his father's question "Would you take it very much to heart if I decided to marry again?" (153), the narrator describes his father's motivation "as some *wandering* whim" (italics mine, 153) until he reads the textual evidence of the newspaper advertisement for a mate. Second, the narrator admits to his own lack of knowledge of the world of emotions when he comments "I had no idea that so much unfulfilled longing *wandered* around in the world" (italics mine, 154) when attempting to assess the "huge pile" of responses the ad generates. Even though "wandering" describes the longing of other people, the narrator's repetition of the word speaks to his own dislocation as well. The lynchpin of this association comes when he offers the lengthiest of descriptions of women replying to his father's call: "a woman who had left at twenty years of age to work at Fords of Dagenham who wanted to come home" (154). His frustrated desire to understand both these women and his father is manifest in his feelings of strangeness when meeting Miss McCabe: "They seemed to have reached some vague, timid understanding that if the holiday went well they'd become engaged before they returned to their schools in September. At their age, or any age, I thought their formality strange, and I an even stranger chaperon" (153). He does not understand them or their behaviour and he clearly feels out of place in the reversed role of chaperon. He cannot figure out Miss McCabe any better than he can comprehend the other women: "there was something about her – a waif-like sense of decency – that was at once appealing and troubling" (155). He can only fall back on more inadequately figurative language: "she was like a girl, in love with being in love a whole life long without ever settling on any single demanding presence until this late backward glance fell on my bereft but seeking father" (155). Miss McCabe cannot settle, the father runs like the rabbit from her not being "near rooted enough" (156) and by the end of the story the narrator joins this pack of wandering creatures seeking a home.

27 Home is the problem for the narrator of "The Stoat" for it is the place of the father's "single demanding presence." The narrator admits to feeling "no pressure to go home for Easter [spending] it with [his] uncle in Dublin" (154), but Dublin is no more home than the cottage or the golf course. When the father is set to abandon Miss McCabe and the failed pursuit for a wife, the narrator asks: "Where'll you go to?" and the father replies, "Home, of course. What are you going to do?" (157). The narrator has no clear answer (just as the rabbit is no answer earlier in the story): "I'll stay here a while longer. I might go to Dublin in a few days" (157). He is trying to negotiate different worlds of family, school and solitude, past, present and future, and ends up at home in none. He longs to understand his ontological position and in looking for a language to do so, all the narrator can imagine is the rabbit and the stoat allegory and that is obviously incapable of full revelation. The final pages of "The Stoat" contain one more repetition (other than the last paragraph) that speaks profoundly to the narrator's ontological doubt.

28 The father learns of Miss McCabe's "mild turn during the night," decides she is "not near rooted enough" and tells his son that the only thing to do is "clear out" (156). The narrator's response to being left holding a metaphorical dead rabbit once again is another unwieldy simile:

> As if all the irons were suddenly being struck and were flowing from all directions to the heart of the green, I saw that my father had started to run like the poor rabbit. He would have been better off if he could have tried to understand something, even though it would get him off nothing. Miss McCabe was not alone in her situation" (156-7).

29 Eamon Grennan notes McGahern's narrative prose can contain "a kind of wilful awkwardness, as if the nature of the observation were frayed, had unfinished aspects, loose threads" (15), and these few lines are certainly awkward. The metaphor of the irons being struck is repeated very soon after with a slight alteration that is revealing. As his father's car goes "out of sight" the narrator has "the *clear* vision again of hundreds of irons being all *cleanly* struck and flowing from every direction into the very heart of the green" (italics mine, 157). Yet, there is no clarity in this vision; what the hundreds of irons mean, why they flow from every direction, and the significance of the heart of the green is an entirely personal and private matter for the narrator. The desire for clarity is certainly here; the narrator wants to understand but his prosaic metaphor fails him, just as his father fails to "understand something" (157). Miss McCabe is not alone in her situation of being abandoned as the narrator is left at the end of the story with little help in seeing the world "cleanly."

30 Even though the narrator revises slightly the image of the irons being struck and flowing from every direction (another representation of upheaval), he nonetheless returns to the opening image of the rabbit and the stoat. All that he is left with, in terms of language as a means of understanding his position in the world, is a recycled image. The repetition of this image is not that strange, for we do go back to stock phrases or used narratives to cope with something unexpected or unintelligible. However, the narrator returns "home" to an image of the violent kill, signifying the inevitability of his failure to close the wounds of the past. He reopens the vein in the rabbit's neck, and the crying does not cease as the stoat drinks the blood again. The turmoil of the rabbit and the stoat's relationship does in fact set the mood of the human relationships in the story, and that mood is disturbing in its violence and dislocation. Because the narrator is not at home in this world, the world remains strange in his struggling visions. The fictional settings of John McGahern's stories may be "intimate worlds, structured by ritual acts, repeated conversations, and familiar gestures" (Brannigan vii), but "The Stoat" – which has all of these elements – is an intimate world of disorder that is structured by violent rituals and repeated images. The familiar gesture of repetition, however, results in a defamiliarization of both reader and narrator. By the end of the story, none of us are "near rooted enough."

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Brannigan, John. “Introduction: The ‘Whole World’ of John McGahern.” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): vii-x

Crotty, Patrick. “‘All Topers’: Children in the Fiction of John McGahern.” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 42-57.

Grennan, Eamon. “‘Only What Happens’: Mulling Over McGahern.” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 13-27.

Goarzin, Anne. “‘A Crack in the Concrete’: Objects in the Works of John McGahern.” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 28-41.

Holland, Siobhán. “Marvellous Fathers in the Fiction of John McGahern.” *Yearbook of English Studies* 35 (2005): 186-98.

“Irish Stoat.” http://doon.mayo-ireland.ie/istoat.html.

Kiberd, Declan. “Fallen Nobility: The World of John McGahern.” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 164-74.

Lloyd, Richard Burr. “*Home Sickness: John McGahern’s Irish Quartet*.” Diss. University of Nebraska, 1995.

Maher, Eamon. “The Irish Novel in Crisis? The Example of John McGahern.” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 58-71.

---. *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal.* Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003.

Malcolm, David. *Understanding John McGahern*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina Press, 2007.

McGahern, John. *Memoir*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005.

---. “Preface.” *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006: vii-viii

---. “The Stoat.” *Getting Through*. London: Faber and Faber 1978: 58-6.

---. “The Stoat.” *Collected Stories*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992: 152-57.

---. “The Image.” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July 1991): 12.

McKeon, Belinda. “‘Robins Feeding With the Sparrows’: The Protestant ‘Big House’ in the Fiction of John McGahern.” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 72-89.

Miller, Karl. “Dark, delightful country things: John McGahern’s austere eloquence.” Rev. of *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories*. *Times Literary Supplement* 8 Dec 2006: 19-20.

Paulin, Tom. Rev. of *Getting Through. Encounter* 50.6 (June 1978): 70.

Sampson, Denis. “Introducing John McGahern.” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July 1991): 1-11.

---. “‘Open to the World’: A Reading of John McGahern’s *That They May Face the Rising Sun.*” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 136-46.

---. *Outstaring Nature’s Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993.

---. “The ‘Rich Whole’: John McGahern’s Collected Stories as Autobiography.” *Journal of the Short Story in English / Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle 34* (Spring 2000): 21-30

van der Ziel, Stanley. ““All This Talk and Struggle’: John McGahern’s *The Dark*.’” *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 104-120

RÉSUMÉS

This paper first considers textual variations of John McGahern’s short story “The Stoat” from its original publication in Getting Through to the revised version in Collected Stories. Then, by focusing on a repeated passage on a rabbit and a stoat, the author reads their story as a narrative of dislocation and doubt. The narrator attempts to make sense of his relationships with others (mostly his father) and his place in the world through an allegorical animal tale. The inadequacy of that imaginative allegory to provide an understanding of the world is due not only to the narrator’s youth and inexperience, but also to the violence in the allegorical narrative. The world of violence cannot be made completely whole.

AUTEURS

DANINE FARQUHARSON

Danine Farquharson is Associate Professor of Irish Literature at Memorial University in St John’s, Newfoundland, Canada. She is co-editor of *Shadows of the Gunmen*: *Violence and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Cork UP, 2008) and has published and presented papers on Roddy Doyle, Robert McLiam Wilson, Edna O’Brien, Neil Jordan and Liam O’Flaherty.