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The Short Stories of John MacGahern

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# "The road away becomes the road back": prodigal sons in the short stories of John McGahern

Margaret Lasch Carroll

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- 1 By John McGahern's death, his short stories<sup>1</sup> appeared in four collections: *Nightlines* (1970), *Getting Through* (1978), *High Ground* (1985), and *The Collected Stories* (1992). The stories within and between volumes find a connectivity through repeating places, images, situations – structural devices Denis Sampson calls “refrains” (Sampson, “Lost Image” 65), and especially in the central consciousness developing from naïve innocence to mature middle age.<sup>2</sup> The journey of the collective protagonist forms a circular route away from and then back to the ancestral home, and the archetypal implications of the journey fraught with indecision are deepened when analyzed in terms of the parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke.
- 2 Luke's story concerns a younger son who leaves home and journeys “into a far country, and there wastes his substance with riotous living” (Luke 15). After exhausting his resources, he returns home welcomed by his father and resented by his older brother. McGahern's protagonists follow a similar path, progressively rejecting their stagnant rural homes for urban independence only to find alienation and emptiness. They ultimately rediscover the virtues of love, family, and rural tradition in his later short stories, moving from the parable's thematic impulses of conflict to co-existence to control to community.
- 3 In his critical study *Prodigal Sons: A Study in Authorship and Authority*, David Wyatt discusses this allegory as one of returning, but with the return only having meaning in relation to the journey. While the older son in the Bible story represses the desire to leave and forfeits the chance to “author” his own story, the prodigal son, through his departure and return, has a story to tell that includes the older brother's experience and more. The older brother, in essence, will always remain a boy because his identity will forever be overshadowed by the father's. One's self-recognition, Wyatt explains, can occur only

through asserting a “fundamental doubleness” between father and son. And this doubleness can only occur when a child tests himself away from the home that has been his only context for self-knowledge. To mature, he thus must leave. Separation in McGahern’s world causes continuous trauma for his overbearing fathers. Father/son conflicts of a particularly brutal nature, as many scholars have noted, are consequently frequent in the author’s fiction. McGahern’s stories offer studies of Luke’s father and both brothers, the one who leaves and the one who stays behind.

- 4 The parable of the Prodigal Son, then, in McGahern’s short stories applies to human maturation made possible by protagonists’ departures and emigrations, and McGahern’s early and middle stories concern children in repressive and stagnant situations and young adults who have left home. Full selfhood is achieved when departures evolve into home comings. Eventually, Wyatt says, in each life there is a turn, the moment when each of us, as the author of his own life, “makes an accommodation with authority and ceases wrestling with his role as son” (Wyatt xiii-xv). Such moments occur in the later stories where McGahern’s characters who have taken their independence to the limit take the turn leading back to community through conventional married life or through re-emersion into the original rural society revitalized by the changed perceptions of the returned native son. We see the homecoming developed most profoundly in McGahern’s final short story, a new addition to his *Collected Stories*, “The Country Funeral”
- 5 McGahern did not publish any more short stories in his lifetime. After his death, however, a posthumous collection of short stories quietly appeared in Great Britain and Ireland in the autumn of 2006, at once a second edition of his 1992 *Collected Stories* and something new altogether. Entitled *Creatures of the Earth*, this final collection omitted seven stories from the 1992 collection, revised a few, rearranged the order, and added two new stories. Most certainly *Creatures* reflects McGahern’s relentless concern with revision. As explained in an essay written early in his career, “The Image,” McGahern stated that his quest as a writer was to find the ever elusive words that would express the one truth that explains our being. The quest endured until the weeks before the author died. Joseph O’Connor writes in the *Guardian* review, “[He] came back to these magnificent stories in the last season of his life,” the collection serving as “a fascinating self-critique.”
- 6 If the stories published in McGahern’s first four collections offer a collective study of Luke’s parable through the progress of the author’s heroes, how is his vision altered by this final edition? A discussion of the prodigal motif in *Nightlines*, *Getting Through*, *High Ground*, and *The Collected Stories* offers a thematic context for an analysis of *Creatures of the Earth*.

## **Nightlines: Conflicts**

- 7 The earliest collection, *Nightlines*, published in 1970, contains twelve short stories set primarily in and around the small rural towns of Leitrim and Roscommon. The dark tone bespeaks a fallen world. Several stories concern young protagonists enacting themes of lost innocence – “Coming Into His Kingdom,” “Christmas,” and “Strandhill, the Sea” – and in “The Key” and “Korea,” father/son conflicts take center stage as sons realize the price exacted on their lives by manipulating fathers. In all five early stories, young protagonists come to see the restrictions imposed on their lives establishing the prodigal need for escape. These young protagonists, James Whyte writes, “have become aware of a discrepancy between their desires and the possibility of fulfilling these desires within the

social order" (Whyte 46). The social order in the childhood stories of *Nightlines* is dominated by McGahern's signature fathers, often veterans of the Irish War of Independence and/or members of the Garda Síochána, representing, according to Whyte, the "authority of the patriarchal society" (Whyte 143). They emerge, in a departure from Luke's more benign father, as jealous forces attempting to stymie their sons' growth at every turn.

- 8 While most of the stories focus on innocent boys awakening to the restrictions of their fallen rural world, *Nightlines* also looks ahead to urban and foreign life with three stories. The despondency follows the prodigal characters who leave the farm for cities and foreign lands as the aimless lives in the Dublin of "Wheels" and "My Love, My Umbrella" reveal: shallow pub raillery in the former is loveless sex in the latter. In "Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass," the relationships of the Irish men on an English work site sizzle with anger and violence. In the Spain of "Peaches," sexual violence threatens to supplant the limbo of a couple's failing love and the menacing father figure reappears, according to Jacques Sohier, as the fascist leader against whom the narrator backs down (Sohier 45).
- 9 The characters continue to struggle as they search for meaning and purpose away from the claustrophobic rural homes of their birth. As they join the throngs in the rapidly growing cities and on the emigrant ships, the author suggests that the leavetaking alone does not satisfy the underlying search for selfhood.
- 10 And if the protagonists didn't leave home? If struggles follow them anyway would they be better off wrestling in the familiar? Three stories interspersed throughout *Nightlines* leave us with a solid, no. McGahern deftly offers glimpses of the prodigal's older brother in "Why We're Here," "Lavin," and "The Recruiting Officer." Older characters exist in a vapid sparsely populated world where time is measured by jibes and trickery, a world characterized by mistrust and rudeness, selfishness and mockery. Indeed Boles and Gillespie in "Why We're Here," represent a distilled picture of McGahern's version of the parable's older brother: their boredom so intense they purposely annoy each other for a bit of action, sniffing continuously around each other – the animal imagery significant – ever ready to attack. Lavin is an old pervert who never left home and whose sexual energies never found a healthy release. The final thematic impression is made with "The Recruiting Officer," where we glimpse the stagnant and lonely life of a rural teacher who passively watches the parish priest beat a schoolboy for theft and later the Christian Brother charm the class of boys into believing they have vocations. The subtle horror of this story is that the teacher lived with the same fears and lures that he witnesses in his classroom and knows their limitations. Yet at this end of his life, living alone above a pub bored with his teaching, he allows the same manipulation to be repeated on his watch. The rural Catholic Church assumes the patriarchal role here and remains iron fisted. Imagination and kindness have been, to return to Joyce, paralyzed.

## ***Getting Through*: co-existence**

- 11 Stories from McGahern's second collection, *Getting Through* (1978) follow the population wave of the 60s and 70s to the city, and are about farm boys, now young adults, in cities, both Irish and foreign. Whyte discusses the unease in these urban transplants who "have broken free of the restrictions of family, community, church, and nationality but ... find that in doing so, they have forfeited a sense of belonging and identity (Whyte 46), and Sampson notes their simultaneous need to belong somewhere again: "They are aware of

the pain of dislocation and ... wish to recover a seamless re-rooting of the self" (Sampson, "Introducing" 65). Many critics explore the urban protagonist's search for meaning in terms of sexual relationships, most of which fail.<sup>3</sup> These characters live among throngs of city dwellers, and we see them in pubs and restaurants, parties and parks. But, while independent, these are not especially fulfilled young men and woman. Amid the crowds and the bustle, they are alienated and aimless.

- 12 If *Nightlines* depicts the fallen nature of the Irish country side and reveals why the McGahern protagonist must leave, *Getting Through* questions what the protagonists find. The early stories in the second collection reveal a greater world that is confusing, barren, loveless, and even violent. David Malcolm says the collection is dominated by motifs of death. Indeed the collection opens and closes with funerals: "Literal deaths and deaths of the soul, deaths of intelligence and the emotions, intimations of mortality, the withering of dreams and prospects pervade the stories: all one can do is get through "(Malcolm 69). In "The Beginning of an Idea," Eva's life goes from bad to worse as she leaves an unsatisfying relationship with a married man in a city in her native country for a solitary life in Spain where she is raped by Spanish police for attempting to help a young guard acquire contraceptives. The very conditions in *Nightlines* force an elderly couple in "A Slip Up" to sell their farm for a life in a London apartment, yet their unhappy displacement is evident when the man can't find his way home through the maze of streets. "Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass" is revisited in "Faith, Hope, and Charity." Two Irish immigrants live lives dominated by machinery and concrete on an English road site, lives where their inability to use their real names bespeaks their lost identities as does the concrete the lifelessness of their existence.
- 13 Yet four stories reassert the rural claustrophobia of *Nightlines*, thus validating the decision to leave, by again pausing on the lives of the protagonists who remain. In "All Sorts of Impossible Things," "Wine Breath," "Swallows," and "Sierra Leone," we revisit the prodigal's older brother. In this collection, unlike in *Nightlines*, the older brothers realize the consequences of their choices. James Sharkey in "All Sorts of Impossible Things" denies the passing of time by avoiding marriage and covering his balding head. When his friend Tom Lennon dies of heart failure, Sharkey has a spasm of desire to make a life: "instead of prayer he now felt a wild longing to throw his hat away and walk round the world bareheaded, find some girl ...go to the sea ... take the boat for the island... hold her in one long embrace all night between the hotel sheets" (*Collected Stories* 145). The final sentence explains the title of the story and reminds us that for Sharkey, it is too late: "And until he calmed ... his mind raced with desire for all sorts of impossible things." In "Wine Breath" and "Swallows" both the country priest and the barracks guard nearing the end of their lives have epiphanies about their un-lived lives and their lost possibilities.
- 14 It's the desperate search for these possibilities for a full life, and ultimate failure of the protagonist to take the chance, that the collection closes with "Sierra Leone" seems to sever the urban male protagonist's ties with his rural roots, the country home populated by the recurring gruff controlling father and timid anxious stepmother, but leaves him adrift in a Dublin where his lover severs ties with him because of his inability to commit. In another recurring pattern, his lover moves further afield from Dublin, by leaving Ireland altogether for Sierra Leone with an older married man. The story ends with the ironic death of his stepmother, Rose, and the protagonist's reluctant duty to his aging father. The author leaves this son dreaming of his own escape beyond Dublin to Sierra Leone. Interestingly, the collection closes not only with the recognition of the dead end

for the parable's older brother, but with the admission that little promise awaits the prodigal traveler. "Sierra Leone" also serves as a prequel to the opening story, "The Beginning of An Idea." As such, the move for the female protagonist to Sierra Leone does not bode well for a future of fulfillment that she, and all the McGahern protagonists desire.

- 15 *Getting Through* closes with a tentative affirmation of the prodigal's break with a stagnant rural life and repressive parental control, but the journey, as the final story suggests, has not yet offered the traveler any rewards.

## ***High Ground: Control***

- 16 Just as *Nightlines* reveals dark shameful hidden truths of the suffocating and provincial childhood years, and *Getting Through* suggests the journey out and liberation from the dark, *High Ground*, published in 1985, presents arrival and openness and understanding. This collection finds a larger cast of characters and protagonists more in control of their own lives, more aware of broader realities, simply happier. Whyte notices "an increased concern with the possibility of reconnecting with a community of shared values, customs, and manners" (Whyte 46). In terms of the parable, the prodigal's journey appears to have been a wise choice.
- 17 McGahern first reminds us, however, of the uncertainty of any departure with more protagonists who have succeeded in making the break with their rural family roots only to struggle in finding adult relationships. Three of the first four short stories continue the exploration of this theme: "Parachutes," "A Ballad," and "Like All Other Men." In "Parachutes," a young man wanders aimlessly around Dublin mourning a lost relationship in the company of like drifters all of whom remain as isolated together as they are apart. His only tie to the group seems to be the money he has to buy the next round of drinks.
- 18 There is sign of change, however, at the end of "Parachutes," when the despair of the McGahern protagonist is perhaps greatest: he glances out the pub door and sees thistledown floating in the air and is imaginatively called back to both love and nature, and thus hope. Eamon Maher says, "There is a hint he is on his way to recovery from the failed affair thanks to his heightened perception of beauty in the ordinary material world of which, up until then, he was largely unaware" (Maher 89). Earlier in the story, his observations were of lifeless stone steps, iron railings, and milk bottles. By story's end, he sees life sprouting from the dung heap in the dancing thistledown, and he has begun "to learn the world all over again" (*Collected Stories* 232).
- 19 This change paves the way for the shift in focus of *High Ground* to another kind of protagonist, a prodigal son well into his journey of discovery – one where the conflicts are not between father and son, country and city or the religious and the secular, but within the newly liberated protagonist over the very choices liberation brings. In the stories "Crossing the Line" and "High Ground," we meet young protagonists who not only have made the break with the strictures of their rural childhoods but who seem to have both the will and opportunity to launch their independent lives, who have the promise of love within their grasp, yet who are suddenly struck with the realization of what their independence costs others. Indeed, what is lost in the gaining. For young Moran in "High Ground," the sheer exaltation of a world of multiple possibilities – including an offer to be

school principal – is colored by the understanding that his success would come at the dismissal of the old master, a mentor who inspired the boy to go on to the university which ironically has put him in his present position. With a transformed protagonist comes a transformed father figure in the benign old master. Sampson suggests that in *High Ground* McGahern “sees the desolation of older generations” (Sampson, *Outstaring* 189) with greater compassion. That the master is clearly in his dotage doesn’t make the young man’s choice any easier. McGahern’s implication here, as in other writing, is that the larger reality is of time itself and the unavoidable and epic conflict between youth and old age, the reality so painfully depicted in the father/son conflicts of the earlier stories, and so poignantly expressed with young Moran and the Master.

- 20 *High Ground* contains three other stories that capture the breath of change in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, and in so doing reflect on a social level the author’s own epiphany about what is lost amid the positive aspects of gaining national selfhood. Whyte suggests that the yearning for the past is directly related to the protagonist’s readiness for a return to participation in society: “in McGahern’s more recent work this possibility of a return to community is repeatedly explored and there is a growing interest in and nostalgia for a world of fixed manners and customs” (Whyte 51). In a departure from the narrow precise focus of most of McGahern’s stories, “Oldfashioned,” “Eddie Mac,” and “The Conversion of William Kirkwood” address directly the cost to Irish culture of independence from Great Britain and offer a retrospective and perhaps more mature gaze at Ireland via the declining Anglo/Irish Ascendancy. In these stories, Ireland itself emerges as the prodigal son, and the Ascendancy takes on the roll of the prodigal’s father left behind. McGahern traces in a very nostalgic tone the decline of the Ascendancy in the tradition of the Anglo/Irish Big House novels. The author introduces his readers to the Sinclairs in “Old Fashioned” and the Kirkwoods in “Eddie Mac” and “The Conversion of William Kirkwood” who, amid their financial decline, continue to value education, hard work, and the courtly virtues of courtesy, generosity, loyalty, and kindness. As Ireland’s independence renders the political control of this class null and void, so too are their social traditions and genteel ways rendered increasingly obsolete. While cheering Ireland’s political coming of age, McGahern does not hide his belief that in the transition, Ireland also seems to lose.
- 21 In “Old Fashioned,” it is young Johnny who loses and, in an interesting double treatment of the parable, the story also plays on an individual level where both the Sinclairs and the boy’s father emerge as different perspectives of the parable’s father, and Johnny is cast as both sons. He is the younger prodigal who yearns to escape another in a long line of McGahern’s repressive fathers: his life with his father is bound by the police barracks and potato fields; when asked about his future, his aspirations are equally bound by what he will be “let do.” He is also the older brother who wants to stay home, home defined by the Sinclairs, remnants of a past way of life that embodies custom, order, and courtesy. It is the Anglo/Irish Sinclairs who recognize the spark of intelligence and curiosity in him simply from the way he arranged a basket of apples, and with that they offer him their library and their company. What defines the Sinclairs as the father the prodigal leaves behind rather than the father of the return is their offer to Johnny of a position in a British military school. It is not surprising that this offer incurs the wrath of the boy’s father, himself a veteran of the Irish War of Independence. While the loss of the Sinclairs is a personal tragedy for Johnny, McGahern suggests that despite their courtly virtues, the Sinclairs were themselves blinded by that old British arrogance, and just didn’t see how their kind offer of a leg up in life via the British army also meant the compromise of

Johnny's Irish identity, an identity only recently hard won. The appeal of the Sinclairs, however, foreshadows the virtues of community life that the returning prodigal will eventually be drawn to.

- 22 "Eddie Mac" and "The Conversion of William Kirkwood" offer us a different definition of the parable's characters. Eddie Mac is our prodigal son who flees from the restrictions of servitude in the Big House of the Kirkwoods. Continuously offering his readers new angles on the same story, McGahern here gives us a prodigal rogue in Eddie, one who lacks, as Sampson says, all "moral principle" (Sampson, *Outstaring* 199). His departure includes stealing from the Kirkwoods and leaving a pregnant Annie Mae in his wake.
- 23 In both Kirkwood stories, we have the declining Ascendancy Kirkwoods who bring all the chivalrous virtues to their Irish environs. But unlike the Sinclairs' story, this narrative is also about the Irishizing of William Kirkwood. Kirkwood then is the prodigal son in the second story in the series, and sympathetic beside Eddie's villainy. Out of kindness and loyalty, even as his house is room by room boarded up, William Kirkwood kept on the housekeeper, Annie May, and her illegitimate daughter, Lucy, long after he needed servants. The three happily have their meals in the kitchen together, and William even takes on the tutoring of young Lucy. His ease with his makeshift family is apparent in the opening scene of the story: "He smiled with pure affection on the girl as she tidied all her books into her leather satchel, and after the three had tea and buttered bread together she came into his arms to kiss him goodnight with the same naturalness as on every night since she had been a small child and he had read her stories" (*Collected Stories* 332). It is through this tutoring that William is introduced to Catholicism and discovers that he is drawn to its history and rituals, and decides to convert.
- 24 His conversion breaks down barriers between the community and him and ends his isolation. Community participation opens the possibility of even greater fulfillment in marriage to the educated, intelligent, and handsome daughter of a prominent Catholic family, a woman brimming with humor and energy who promises to open up the locked rooms of the Kirkwood manor. By story's end, William has remained true to himself and still found both love and community. He emerges as the returned prodigal, his journey complete without physically leaving Oakport. The story is a crowning affirmation of Irish social life since it is celebrated through the eyes of a member of the Protestant Ascendancy. But here, too, new possibilities bring the dilemma of choice as William realizes his life with Annie May and Lucy cannot continue after his marriage. The closing scene is haunting as William rocks alone in the dark thinking "whether there was anyway his marriage could take place without bringing suffering to two people who had been a great part of his life, who had done nothing themselves to deserve being driven out into a world they were hardly prepared for" (*Collected Stories* 349). McGahern's sympathies clearly include the marginalized Annie Mae and Lucy.
- 25 "Oldfashioned," "Eddie Mac," and "The Conversion of William Kirkwood" are remarkable in their treatment of Luke's parable. McGahern finds multiple ways to cast parts in the story to shed light on complicated personal and social dynamics. He also offers various perspectives for understanding the parts. His angry fathers play out as contemptible in some stories and sympathetic in others while the prodigal himself changes from prisoner to victimizer. At this stage in the author's thematic progression, McGahern finds himself both taking a final nostalgic look back at what the prodigal traveler is leaving behind and anticipating what the homecoming will bring.



- 26 *High Ground* concludes then with both a swan song to the traditions of the Ascendancy, and thus the parable's father, and the promise of the future for the McGahern protagonist and for Ireland itself. Two of the final three stories in the collection offer a chance at a full life and love through marriage to the recurring prodigal protagonist who in earlier stories has cut the tether to father and farm but had yet to find fulfillment. Sampson discusses marriage as a reentry into society: it "balances needs of the outsider with limits of social laws, communal laws" (Sampson, *Outstaring* 202). "Gold Watch"<sup>4</sup> presents a young professional man and woman who have both broken away from domineering families, hers in a small country town, his a replay of the cruel farmer father bent on subverting the natural flow of time by making his son feel guilty for leaving home and the heavy farm work to him. The father's broken gold watch signifies his denial of time, and the son's taking and fixing the watch symbolizes his concerted effort to make his own life. By the end of the story, the son's break with his father is complete; there will be no more weekends west to help with the hay. The moment in the prodigal's journey when he stops looking backward suggests he can look forward, preparing him to return and receive the virtues inherent in community life. The father/son relationship in "Gold Watch," according to Whyte, could thus be said "to chart a movement toward liberation for the son, at the price of a bitter [and we might add, final] alienating battle against an 'ogre' of a father figure" (Whyte 165). Here finally McGahern offers us a happy portrayal of hard won independence, love, and city life.
- 27 "Bank Holiday" smoothes the rough edges of departure without the loss of independence and love. A man well into his middle years, who has spent the weekends and holidays of his young adulthood taking the train from Dublin west, finds himself alone after his parents' death. No longer with expectations of life's greater possibilities, serendipity brings him together with an American woman on a bank holiday in Dublin. Their one day becomes a week and then a month and then a commitment to each other. By the end of *High Ground* the prospects look good.

## ***The Collected Stories: Community***

- 28 *The Collected Stories*, published in 1992, essentially gathered *Nightlines*, *Getting Through*, and *High Ground* together and added two new stories. It is worth pausing for a moment to discuss this volume. The slight differences to the earlier collections involved renaming "Bomb Box," "The Key," and rewriting "The Stoat" from a different point view. These changes to McGahern's overarching prodigal theme are slight.
- 29 "Sierra Leone" was moved from the *Getting Through* batch of stories to the end of the *High Ground* stories. (See illustration.) And "Gold Watch" was moved from the end to the beginning of the *High Ground* Stories, moves which do slightly shift McGahern's thematic emphasis. Not only do all of McGahern's stories form as Maher calls "a rich whole" (Maher 63), their sequencing informs the collective theme. The new placement of "Gold Watch" enacts the moment of true liberation from father and farm earlier in the collective journey and perhaps suggests a failure in the love relationship of that story with the succeeding "Parachutes," "A Ballad," and "Like All Other Men." These failures leave the protagonist furthest from home, "in a far country" his substance "wasted" as Luke narrates in the parable, and thus poised to most deeply know himself allowing for the subsequent broader perspective which emerges as the sympathetic retrospectives in

"Oldfashioned," "Eddie Mac," "Crossing the Line," "High Ground," and "The Conversion of William Kirkwood."

- 30 By moving "Sierra Leone" towards the end of *The Collected Stories*, McGahern reminds us ultimately of rural bankruptcy despite the difficulties of the prodigal journey; the virtues of community can only be realized after leaving and after self-discovery: in other words in homecoming, not in staying home. What emerges in these few sequencing changes is a more direct thematic path toward the return of the traveler. It is indeed in homecoming that McGahern offers a more positive reframing of rural customs leading to the stark reminder in the penultimate story, a new addition entitled "The Creamery Manager," that community is perhaps all we have to protect us from our more natural solitary human condition: an outlaw in a cell. The thematic direction of this volume concludes with an exploration of the consummate value of familial and social bonds with "The Country Funeral," a beautiful celebration of community set back in the Leitrim-Roscommon world that Sampson rightly claims is "the anchor of [McGahern's] imagination, to which he always returns, because as he said, it is real" (Sampson, *Outstaring* 11). The seed for the prodigal's return begins in *Getting Through* with the communal kindness of "Faith, Hope, and Charity," continues with the floating thistledown catching the despondent hero's eye at the end of "Parachutes," and is explored in the Sinclair/Kirkwood stories. "Inevitably," Whyte says, "the road becomes circular and in the words of Elizabeth Reegan, 'the road away becomes the road back'" (Whyte 44).
- 31 "The Country Funeral," published for the first time in his *Collected Stories* in 1992, finds solace in the simplicity of the day to day lives of the rural Irish and in the pattern the lives of these people have formed over generations. McGahern celebrates these lives for merely carrying on in the shadow of uncertainty, lives glued together by family, community, customs, traditions, and especially courtesy. This beautiful celebration of home and roots that Philly Ryan finds in Gloria Bog contrasts to the cement city of his fractured family in Dublin, and the isolation of the desert hotel room in Tehran where Philly lives most of the year working for an oil company. Philly's wondrous response to Gloria Bog when he first drives up to his uncle's house belies his homecoming – he sees "acres of pale sedge ... all lit up giving back much of the [moon] light it was receiving, so that the places that were covered with heather melted into a soft blackness ... the scattered shadows of the small birches ... soft and dark" (*Collected Stories* 393) – and measures the changes that have taken place in the prodigal traveler when contrasted to his older brother, the narrator of "The Recruiting Officer" who describes the same place as "the empty waste of wheat-coloured sedge and stunted birch of Gloria Bog" (*Collected Stories* 107). The call back to the west of Ireland to attend his uncle's funeral opens Philly's eyes and fills his heart. So much so that he buys the farm and finds his home.
- 32 "The Country Funeral" acts as a coda to *The Collected Stories* in that it concludes the prodigal's journey and recapitulates the prodigal story. Philly is the composite McGahern protagonist: he spent childhood summers in the country with an ornery uncle, experienced the impersonal aimlessness of urban life, moved beyond the Irish shores as an isolated itinerant on the oil rigs, and returns to the west of Ireland for a funeral finding in the process his home. Philly is of course the prodigal son. And what rounds out the parable is the warm welcome the traveling son receives from his father: Luke writes, "when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.... the father said to his servants, bring forth the best

robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry" (Luke 15). In "The Country Funeral," the many gracious and generous neighbors in Gloria Bog take on the role of the welcoming father, and it is through their traditional Irish display of hospitality that Philly is embraced by the community. Of the Cullens, McGahern writes, "They'd seen [Philly] coming from the road and Jim Cullen went out to meet him before he reached the door ... Without asking him, Mrs. Cullen poured him a glass of whiskey and a chair was pulled out for him at the table ... They then offered him a bed" (*Collected Stories* 395).

## ***Creatures of the Earth: Chaos***

- 33 What does *Creatures of the Earth* do to this paradigm? Several stories are omitted from the *Nightlines* and *Getting Through* collections, the *High Ground Stories* are rearranged with "Sierra Leone," already having been moved from the *Getting Through* stories to the *High Ground* stories, moving again up the sequence of the *High Ground* stories, and "The Creamery Manager," one of the new concluding stories of the *Collected Stories*, moving into the middle of the *High Ground* stories. And while *Creatures* leaves "The Country Funeral" as not only the collection's conclusion, but the conclusion of McGahern's life work, he plants two sobering new stories between the lovely "Bank Holiday" and the celebratory "Country Funeral."
- 34 The three stories omitted from the *Nightlines* group – "Coming In His Kingdom," "Lavin," and "The Key," are stories of lost innocence whose themes are examined in other stories in that group. The same can be said for the omissions from the *Getting Through* stories: "The Stoat," "Doorways," "Along the Edge," and "The Beginning of an Idea." None of the stories from his third collection, *High Ground*, are eliminated, however, and *Creatures* includes the two additions to *The Collected Stories* plus two previously uncollected stories. The elimination of stories from *Nightlines* and *Getting Through* and the addition of stories to the *High Ground* end do have a thematic effect. With the elimination, earlier themes are condensed and perhaps even minimized and with the addition of later stories, later themes are given more weight. There is a shift in the balance, resulting in a deeper treatment of the final arc of the prodigal's journey, the homecoming.
- 35 While *The Collected Stories* does very little to the sequencing of the *High Ground* volume, *Creatures* does a minor reshuffling. The stories are re-clustered in significant ways to become what O'Connor calls "tributaries of one another working out implications." The rearranging brings the three stories with the broader historical perspective together – "Old Fashioned," "Eddie Mac," and "The Conversion of William Kirkwood" – intensifying both McGahern's nostalgia for a society built on courtesy, culture, and tradition in a Yeatsian reaction to the modern tide and his anticipation of the prodigal's return.
- 36 This change pushes "Crossing the Line," "High Ground," and "Like All Other Men" up with "Gold Watch," "Parachutes," and "A Ballad," all stories which play out versions, both positive and negative, of the young male protagonist as he experiences his independence. "Gold Watch," "Parachutes," and "A Ballad" examine the protagonist at the bend in the prodigal's circular road; "Crossing the Line," "High Ground," and "Like All Other Men" examine the bitter sweetness for protagonists who have taken control of their lives.

- 37 The following two stories, "Sierra Leone" and "The Creamery Manager" appear in new positions to emphasize the focus of the two groups of stories they separate. "Sierra Leone" reinforces the personal tragedy of failing to leave – the leaving having been explored in the six previous stories – and "Creamery Manager" emerges as the allegory of the independent life pointing to the reconsideration of social participation. Coming as they do, after the "Crossing the Line" group, the author seems to suggest two things: first, despite the doubts of the characters of the "Crossing" group, they risk having the life of the "Sierra Leone" protagonist if they don't spread their wings, yet, second, spreading their wings can result in the predicament of the creamery manager. We sense McGahern himself struggling with the two contrary forces of community and independence represented by the two brothers in Luke's parable. It's at this point, perhaps the tipping point, that the author allows a broader perspective in the Sinclair/Kirkwood stories that concern the shifting social weight from the Anglo Irish Ascendancy to the native Irish. While these stories reveal a nostalgia for the customs, courtesy, and culture of the Ascendancy thrown out with the bath water of British oppression, the rearrangement of the stories in *Creatures* place a greater emphasis on these stories as an anticipation for the prodigal son and resolve McGahern's struggle: independence doesn't preclude community; it can exist within the community, but only after independence has been achieved. This is perhaps the parable's ultimate truth.
- 38 *Creatures* ends with the quietly hopeful "Bank Holiday" and the triumphant "The Country Funeral." Sandwiched between these stories of hope are the two new stories "Creatures of the Earth" and "Love of the World," stories which can do nothing short of stun the reader. They are perhaps the darkest and even most nihilistic narratives in McGahern's entire oeuvre.
- 39 The story that gives the collection its title, "Creatures of the Earth," appears to follow the tenor of "Bank Holiday" in its evocation of a happy marriage and family, and lives both cultured and comfortable, lived amid a solid community. But the story takes a disturbing turn when happenstance brings the family cat in the path of two vagrants who for no reason other than a vague resentment of the apparent wealth of the cat's owners, stuff the cat into a bag with bricks and toss it into the harbor. This event is echoed in the brief conversations the protagonist, now a widow, has with a man while taking her daily walks. As "good mornings" extend into brief exchanges, she becomes increasingly unsettled by the violence suggested in his comments, including, significantly, his tale of drowning a dog, until she changes the route of her walks to avoid him. This point in the story coincides with the drowning of the woman's cat, whose disappearance saddens her deeply, the cause for which she never discovers. In his review of *Creatures* in Scotland's *Sunday Herald*, Alan Taylor writes of the title story, "As is often the case in [McGahern's] stories, 'Creatures of the Earth' seems ruminatively aimless and then – as in the best stories – comes something truly, casually, evilly shocking, something to make you gasp in disgust."
- 40 "Love of the World" is a more overtly violent and disturbing story of spousal abuse and murder. A lovely young woman, beloved by parents and friends, marries the town football hero turned garda and has three healthy children in rapid succession. Again, this could be a promising follow up to "Bank Holiday," until the garda husband is injured on duty, an injury that ends his football game and his police career. He becomes increasingly controlling and promiscuous until an act of violence sends his wife running from their house. Despite newer divorce laws, she loses custody of her children and after an

evening visit with them is shot in the back by her husband. Again, Taylor writes, "What is remarkable about this story is the quiet way in which it unfolds towards the inevitable but unpredictable tragedy and the compassion McGahern brings to its telling and the sorrow one feels he must have felt at the denial of youthful promise."

- 41 These stories are the most pessimistic in McGahern's canon. What connects the two stories is a world view without fairness, without generosity, without compassion – the antithesis of that in the Gloria Bog of "The Country Funeral" – and a sense that essentially, the human condition at its most natural is violent and selfish. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Karl Miller writes of their tone, "Authority is gone. Priest and doctor are disbelieved. 'Mere anarchy' assumes the evil force of human meanness polluting a beautifully rendered cliffscape."
- 42 Coming as these stories do, in his last collection, and placed where they are, stories twenty seven and twenty eight of twenty nine, changes the way we assess McGahern's overall thematic vision. The concluding story in the prodigal journey is the home coming, and as already discussed, "The Country Funeral" is certainly a celebration of exactly that. However, the life affirming momentum begun with *High Ground* and continued with "The Country Funeral," is completely stalled in *Creatures*. The events in "Creatures of the Earth" and "Love of the World" are devoid of meaning, the protagonists' hapless victims in a cruel world, love and community safeguarding them from nothing. Following these stories, the impact of "Country Funeral" is severely compromised. That McGahern still chose this story to conclude his short fiction is telling, but the warning that all purposes could vanish in a moment now informs that final homecoming. These stories imply that community, love, generosity, all the marks of a civilized people, are indeed precariously laid veneers. Looking back, this nihilism has emerged now and then: from the early "Why We're Here" and "Hearts of Oak," to the middle "The Beginning of An Idea," to the later "Eddie Mac," we witness man's inhumanity to man (and it usually is men). Before *Creatures*, however, one could interpret those glimpses as McGahern's assertions that we validate our own insecure existence by harming others, and that as the McGahern hero is transformed by self knowledge and re-emersion into his community – as the prodigal's journey away becomes the road home – these glimpses are recast in the affirmative as the boundless virtues of both home and humanity.
- 43 The stories "Creatures of the Earth" and "Love of the World" change all that. Even if one will argue that these stories were written in the mid-90s before the vision of love, nature, community, and happiness of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, that McGahern resurrected them for his last publication and placed them as the penultimate two stories, makes the title of his one play, *The Power of Darkness*, linger longer than before.

NIGHTLINES	GETTING THROUGH	HIGH GROUND	COL. STORIES	CREATURES OF THE EARTH
Wheels				
Why we're H.				
Coming Into				omitted
Christmas				

Hearts of Oak				
Standhill				
Bomb Box			The Key	omitted
Korea				
Lavin				
My Move My				
Peaches				omitted
Ecruiting Off.				
	Begin. of an I			omitted
	A Slip up			
	All Sorts of I			
	Faith, Hope,			
	The Stoat		Pt of view re.	omitted
	Doorways			omitted
	Wine Breath			
	Along the Ed			omitted
	Swallows			
	Sierra Leone		Gold Watch	
		Parachutes		
		A Ballad		
		Old Fashion.		Crossing the
		Like All Oth.		High Ground
		Eddie Mac		Like All Oth.
		Crossing the		Sierra Leone
		High Ground		Creamery M.
		Gold Watch	Sierra Leone	Old Fashion.

		Convers. W K		Eddie Mac
		Bank Holiday		
			Creamery M.	Bank Holiday
			Country Fune	Creature of . .
				Love of the W
				Country Fune

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## RÉSUMÉS

This article is an analysis of John McGahern's short fiction as a retelling of the parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke. The case is made that the entire body of short fiction forms one connected work and that the journey of the central protagonist forms a circular route away from and then back to the ancestral home. The archetypal implications of the journey fraught with indecision are deepened when analyzed in terms of the parable. I take into consideration the four volumes of short stories published during McGahern's life – *Nightlines*, *Getting Through*, *High Ground*, and *The Collected Stories* – and conclude with an extended discussion of his posthumous collection, *Creatures of the Earth*, and the effect it has on our understanding of his work

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