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"Korea" by John McGahern

Douglas Cowie

- 1 Midway through a public reading at Colgate University in New York State in 1996, John McGahern announced that, because someone had requested it of him, he would now read his short story, "Korea." A hushed anticipation rippled across the audience: a master was about to read a masterpiece. In that same semester, McGahern taught an Irish literature course at Colgate. He'd tried to insist that the course be titled "Irish Poetry", despite the fact that the course syllabus was almost exclusively novels and stories. To McGahern, poetry was less about form or genre than it was about how the language was used, how the rhythms and imagery of the written word combined to make a work of art. In this sense, one can read "Korea" not only as a short story, but also as poetry of the highest order.
- 2 "Korea" is a kind of rural elegy, or a softly-chanted lament to the subtle but significant changes in relationships between father and son on one level, and between rural Ireland and the world outside its borders on another. Superficially it is the story of a fisherman and potato farmer father and his teenaged son performing the routines of their common working life for the final time. The story is set on a single day sometime during the years of the war from which it takes its name (that is to say, sometime after 1950 and before 1953), and is narrated by the son from the vantage point of several years later. This point-of-view is crucial to the drama of the story, which hinges both on the position of the son relative to his father and the son's emotional insight as an older man.
- 3 The story begins with a question from the son: "You saw an execution then too, didn't you?", I asked my father, and he started to tell as he rowed."¹ This opening sentence contains all the crucial elements of the story: a question; the narrator and his father, directly next to each other in the grammar of the sentence; the father telling as he rows, in other words, as he works. Father and son are working together for the final time, it transpires; the commercial fishing is dying out, and the son will soon leave either to further education or more profitable work. The idea of asking and telling are both important here; as it moves forward the story becomes a narrative of what father and son do and do not tell each other as much as it is about other concerns.

- 4 The father relates the story of the execution, in 1919, of two prisoners "in Mountjoy as reprisals." After being captured "in an ambush" the father witnessed the shooting of "a man in his early thirties, and what was little more than a boy, sixteen or seventeen." The boy is the same age as the narrator at the time in which the story takes place; the man is possibly the same age as the narrator at the time he is narrating. Although the story's opening sentence says that the father told the story, it is related secondhand, by the narrator. This choice is not mere convenience, but a nuance of narrative technique. The story of the execution could easily have been written in the father's direct words. That the son relates the story suggests that it is an anecdote that he has heard before, perhaps more than once. It is a story that he has absorbed. The "didn't you" at the end of the opening question suggests as much. He is asking, at a time of civil war on the Korean Peninsula, to be told again of a time of war much closer to home, and he relates the scene in great detail, which implies that he knows this story well.
- 5 The younger man was "[...] weeping. They blindfolded the boy, but the man refused the blindfold. When the officer shouted, the boy clicked to attention, but the man stayed as he was, chewing very slowly. He had his hands in his pockets." (54) The repetition of the word "blindfold", albeit in slightly different forms, and the fact that the boy has his eyes covered and the man doesn't, emphasises that these two prisoners stand on opposite sides of a divide. One has crossed into a cynical adulthood, wherein he faces even his own execution with his eyes open and a nonchalant chew, his hands pocketed. The other, still a youth, plays soldier to the end, snapping to attention despite his tears, despite his blindfold. The two not only face their respective deaths, but also die, in harshly contrasting manner. The boy tears at his chest, "as if to pluck out the bullets, and the buttons of the tunic began to fly into the air before he pitched forward on his face." Again, youth fights in vain to the last, with a violence that is an absurd imitation of the violence of war itself. On the other hand, the older man "heeled quietly over on his back: it must have been because of the hands in the pockets." (54) Experience pitches over, facing upwards, his eyes presumably still open. The man's death, or rather, his act of dying, is not an imitation, but a mockery of the passions and causes that send men to kill each other, and in this particular case, of men who execute "as reprisals." It is a mockery of meaningless revenge. The sense of meaninglessness is underscored by the ironic commentary that follows the caesura of the colon: "it must have been because his hands were in his pockets." This phrase also marks the first instance in which the narrator passes commentary upon the events, speculating, possibly in echo of his father's telling, on the mundane reason behind the difference in the direction in which each prisoner fell. In the next paragraph the narrator relates that after they fell, the officer killed the boy with a single shot, "but he pumped five bullets in rapid succession into the man, as if to pay him back for not coming to attention." (54) Again, a note of commentary finds its way into the telling, and again it serves both as a contrast to the manner in which each prisoner died, and as an ironic statement. The youth, flailing and clutching at unreachable bullets, receives a quick and simple insurance dispatchment; the cynical older man, keeling over with his hands in his pockets, receives a postmortem hail of bullets that may be the officer's only means of expressing his frustration or hatred, but mean even less to the dead man than his execution seemed to.
- 6 From this moment the focus on the execution story begins to move from retelling to discussion between father and son. The narrator now quotes his father directly as he tells of his honeymoon "years after." The father relates that, looking down to the sea with his

new wife, he “saw the furze pods bursting, and the way they burst in all directions seemed shocking like the buttons when he started to tear at his tunic” (54-55). Here the execution—and by extension, the war—is linked to nature, and more specifically, to the landscape of Ireland. The exploding furze (or gorse) pods, which might usually be seen as beautiful or at the very least unextraordinary, are perverted through association with the buttons of the boy’s tunic into something so “shocking” that “I couldn’t get it out of my mind all day. It destroyed the day” (55). These are the words of a man haunted by the executions he witnessed more than thirty years previously: it haunted him years later on his honeymoon, and it haunts him now as he retells the story. The repetition of “day” underscores this feeling, and indeed, the father will later make explicit that more than just one day was destroyed by the memory.

- 7 The first indication of the father’s continuing pain, and particularly his discomfort at talking about the execution comes when the son suggests that the boy might have “stood to attention because he felt that he might still get off if he obeyed the rules?” The father dismisses this idea as naïve:

“Sounds a bit highfalutin’ to me. Comes from going to school too long,” he said aggressively, and I was silent. It was new to me to hear him talk about his own life at all. Before, if I asked him about the war, he’d draw fingers across his eyes as if to tear a spider web away, but it was my last summer with him on the river, and it seemed to make him want to talk, to give of himself before it ended. (55)

- 8 This paragraph marks the first turning point in the story. The father speaks with open antagonism towards his son, directly moving him to silence, as implied by the syntax: the father speaks “aggressively,” and the narrator immediately notes, in the same sentence, that he fell silent. At the same time, however, the father has just opened up about a subject that he normally avoids. The spider web simile again connects the war to an image of nature. Here the spider web is the memory of war, or of an event within the war. The gesture is that of a man removing an invisible blindfold, one that (if it actually existed), would only obscure the vision, not obstruct it entirely. The father is neither the blindfolded boy, nor the open-eyed cynic, but rather someone inbetween. The son, on the receiving end of this act of “[giving] of himself,” in other words, sharing a type of communion with his father, is making the first movements out of innocence as well.
- 9 But for the moment father and son have lapsed into silence, and get on with their work. Descriptions of people undertaking manual labor of various kinds is a particular McGahern forte, and the two paragraphs that mark the silence describe the details of eel fishing in a straightforward manner that despite—or rather, because of—its simplicity creates a ritualistic and meditative tone. The narrator describes the two miles of line that he must haul in hand over hand, and then states: “We were the last to fish this freshwater for a living.” (55) The simple declarative, which ends the paragraph, places the two men in an important context: the work that they undertake is a way of living that will die with them, or when they stop doing it. This work, this ritual, this culture has become unviable, as is made explicit later in the story, in the face of economic reality.
- 10 For now, however, father and son work together, the father rowing while son hauls in the fish. “As the eels came in over the side I cut them loose with a knife into a wire cage, where they slid over each other in their own oil, the twisted eel hook in their mouths.” The eels, which will be sent to market in London, are separated from the other fish, which will be sold locally or given away. While the son pulls in the line, the focus is solely on the details of the work: the hooks, the types of fish, the procedure. Halfway through the job,

however, father and son switch roles. "After a mile he took my place in the stern and I rowed." (55) Although this is a simple declarative sentence in the middle of a fairly long descriptive paragraph, it marks a couple of important, if subtle, shifts. First, no longer concentrating on the minutiae of collecting their catch, the narrator broadens his perspective and describes the river. The description serves to emphasize a sense of isolation:

People hadn't woken yet, and the early morning cold and mist were on the river. Outside of the slow ripple of the oars and the threshing of the fish on the line beaded with running drops of water as it came in, the river was dead silent, except for the occasional lowing of cattle on the banks. (55)

11 Father and son are the sole source of activity. Paradoxically, the narrator notes that the river is "dead silent", but does so in the middle of a sentence that describes nothing but sounds. In actual fact, the river is not silent. The sound, however, is generated entirely by the work of the two protagonists, apart from the cows, who unlike the two humans, speak.

12 The point about speaking isn't an idle or frivolous one; the second shift marked by the change of roles in the boat is a shift in the conversation. Previously, while the father rowed, the son asked questions. As noted, the story began with a question. Following the execution story, he asks two more. From this moment in the story, however, the son rows, and the father will begin to speak in questions. The first is, "Have you any idea what you'll do after this summer?" (55) It seems a natural and straightforward enough question, and is answered as such by the son, without any remark. They discuss the son's exams, and they effect they'll have on his future, through two further questions and answers. But when son answers father's question about how good he thinks the exam results will be with a rhetorical question of his own, the tone shifts yet again:

'I think they'll be all right, but there's no use counting chickens, is there?'
'No,' he said, but there was something calculating in the face; it made me watchful of him as I rowed the last stretch of the line. (56)

13 The narrator only notes "*something* calculating"² in his father's face. This moment of vagueness is important in a story so carefully and richly detailed. It is a moment of both recognition and uncertainty. The son notes "something" that makes him wary without being able to place quite what that something is. A note of danger has crept into the narrative, subtly but noticeably heightening the tension that began to rise with the father's aggressive, "Sounds a bit highfalutin' to me." Again the conversation gives way to the details of work. As they finish the first stage of their day's work, the rest of their world begins to awake. "The day had come, the distant noises of the farms and the first flies on the river." The father tries to restart the conversation by commenting on the haul of fish, but his comment passes without remark from the son, who only passes information outside of the narrative:

'We'll have enough for a consignment tomorrow,' he said.
Each week we sent the live eels to Billingsgate in London. (56)

14 The implied silence creates a brief awkward moment; a one-sentence paragraph is followed immediately by the father's second attempt to restart the conversation. The same character speaks twice in quick succession, and the slight formal jarring reflects the awkward tension that is rising between the protagonists. The reference to Billingsgate also serves to widen the perspective of the story, tying this isolated rural life to a wider context and also reinforcing the previous statement that they are the last to make their living in this way.

- 15 Father restarts for the second time with a question that cuts directly to what is on his mind, although he states it in an awkward torrent of words: "But say, say even if you do well, you wouldn't think of throwing this country up altogether and going to America?" (56) This marks the most words the father has spoken outside of the execution story. The awkward repetition of "say" coupled with the opening "but" betray the father's hesitancy at asking the question, the calculation of his facial expression replaced by the anxiety of his words. Indeed, the narrator describes his father's question as "words fumbled for." The rest of the dialogue will proceed through questions from both characters. The son's questions—"Why America?", "Who'd pay the fare?", "Why should you scrape for me to go to America if I can get a job here?"—are those of the "watchful" young man, caught off guard by his father's behavior. The father speaks in a mixture of question and statement that serves to underscore his uneasiness. He is not in fact a man speaking what is on his mind. Rather, he is a man speaking around what is on his mind, protecting both himself and his son from the bursting furze pod shock of the truth behind what he is saying. Continuing to fumble for words, he speaks of America as "the land of opportunity" and "a big, expanding country," comparing it to an Ireland that is a "poky place" with "no room for ambition." The son stays on guard, and notes it bluntly, albeit not to his father. Again, this story is more about what these two protagonists do not say to each other than it is about what they do say. In his role as narrator, the son says, "I was wary of the big words. They were not in his own voice." (56) In his role as son he remains silent on the subject of wariness and asks instead, "Who'd pay the fare?"
- 16 But if the words are not the father's own, the question to ask is, whose are they. Just as the son, in narrating the execution story, chooses words that seem to belong to his father, here the father is choosing words that belong to someone else. He describes America using cliché, and his comments on Ireland sound rehashed from pub conversation. In imploring his son to go off to America, he is to some degree telling someone else's story, as will become starkly clear. The conversation ends with another verbose statement from the father, although this one is more controlled than his opening salvo. "I feel I'd be giving you a chance I never got. I fought for this country. And now they want to take away even the licence to fish. Will you think about it anyhow?" All the elements of the story are tied together in this statement. The father ends with a question, again betraying a degree of uncertainty. He expresses his natural desire as a parent to provide for his child. He also refers explicitly to the beginning of the story, to the fact that he fought for Ireland. In light of what is to come, the fact that he says that he fought for "this country" is significant. Finally, the father captures the frustration of being caught in the economic reality of a way of life that is changing beyond his control, and despite the fact that years ago he fought in a war that was in part about preserving that way of life. Indeed, the very thing that the father fought against—England—is the cause of this change. Towards the end of the following paragraph, the narrator notes that the fishing license application had been opposed by the tourist board. "They said we impoverished the coarse fishing for tourists—the tourists who came every summer from Liverpool and Birmingham in increasing numbers to sit in aluminium deck-chair on the riverbank and fish with rods." (56-57). Whereas father and son are intrinsically linked to the river, fishing on the water, the tourists' outsider status is reinforced by their "aluminium deck-chairs" in which they sit "on the riverbank", in other words, not on the river itself, "and fish with rods" rather than with lines in the water, which they must pull in hand over hand, as father and son do.

- 17 If there is a thinly-disguised contempt for the English tourists, however, the narrator expresses little romance about the work from which the tourists are driving him. Before he comments on the tourists, the morning gives way to day and the story moves into a third phase. Father works in the potato field while son “replaced hooks on the line and dug worms” (56). The protagonists are physically separate for the first time in the story. As he works, the narrator registers the ambivalence he feels about the task. He feels the “... pain of doing things for the last time as well as the boredom the knowledge brings that soon there’ll be no need to do them, that they could be discarded almost now. The guilt of leaving came: I was discarding his life to assume my own.” (56) Again McGahern employs repetition—of “discard”—to provide emphasis. The narrator first registers the pain of doing a routine that he will never do again, but this quickly moves to boredom, and the first use of discard underscores that sense of boredom—the work hardly matters today, it could be thrown away now. The second use, however, is associated with guilt. Whereas the first use of the word was in a passive construction, the grammar here is active, employing the gerund form — “I was discarding”— and the direct object is “his life.” Discarding work creates boredom; discarding his father’s life, turning his back not only on a job or routine, but a whole way of living, engenders guilt. For when the son leaves, the father’s livelihood will end: “a man to row the boat would eat into the decreasing profits of the fishing.” With the morning work finished and the separation of labor, the tension that had been building in the boat dissipates. Although he told his father he would think about America, he apparently gives it no further thought whatsoever. Instead he thinks only of the boredom, and the guilt of the fact that by turning his back on that boredom, he is also abandoning his father to a tenuous living.
- 18 The climax to the story comes as an ambush. As he walks to the lavatory, where they store the bait worms, the son observes his father talking to a cattle dealer friend. He assumes they’re “talking about the price of cattle” (57) until, as he steps into the lavatory, “the word *Moran* came, and I carefully opened the door to listen. It was my father’s voice. He was excited.” (57) Outside of dialogue these are the shortest two sentences in the story, and the rhythmic rupture underscores the schism that the father’s words will create. It becomes immediately clear why the name *Moran* gives the narrator pause. The “excited” father again speaks in a torrent of words, arranged in two separate but consecutive paragraphs:
- ‘I know. I heard the exact sum. They got ten thousand dollars when Luke was killed. Every American soldier’s life is insured to the tune of ten thousand dollars.’
‘I heard they get two hundred and fifty dollars a month each for Michael and Sam while they’re serving,’ he said. (57)
- 19 The last time the father spoke it was of America as well, but it was of America as “the land of opportunity,” and the America that would give his son “the chance I never got.” Now America is a country in need of soldiers “to the tune of ten thousand dollars.” It is the America fighting a war in the country that gives the story its title. It is a country that will pay “two hundred and fifty dollars a month” to the families who send their Irish boys away to fight. The father has told Farrell directly what he could only talk around when discussing it with his son. When Farrell responds it becomes clear that he and the father were discussing livestock prices after all. “‘They’re buying cattle left and right,’ Farrell’s voice came as I closed the door and stood in the darkness, in the smell of shit and piss and the warm fleshy smell of worms crawling in too little clay.” The cloacal stench—shit piss, worms—mixing with the clay places the son firmly in a grave. And yet, the lavatory is simultaneously a safe haven that protects him from the full impact of what he has heard.

Here the narrator's point of view becomes important. At the exact moment of climax of the story, the older man narrates the death of his childhood from the vantage of maturity, marking it with a degree of understatement. "The shock I felt was the shock I was to feel later when I made some social blunder, the splintering of a self-esteem and the need to crawl into a lavatory to think." (57) That he relates it to an emotion he "was to feel later" suggests not only that he has left childhood behind, but also that in that moment he does not have the emotional equipment to understand exactly what he feels. But he registers a shock and embarrassment that becomes associated with "the need to crawl into the lavatory to think." As noted, while he told his father he would think about what had been said about America, he has to this point given it no thought. Now he begins to think, and it is that thinking that pulls the blindfold of his youth from his eyes.

- 20 He relates the American military funeral of Luke Moran matter-of-factly, but it must have been a strange event in this village. Indeed, the images jar against each other when presented in this straightforward manner. "Luke Moran's body had come from Korea in a leaden casket, had crossed the stone bridge to the slow funeral bell with the big cars from the embassy behind, the coffin draped in the Stars and Stripes." It reads almost as an invasion. The narrator notes "the clay" thrown into the grave. This is the third use of "clay" in half a page; the previous two were associated with the worms crawling in the latrine. The point of relating the funeral is not, however, to mourn Luke Moran, but rather, to symbolize the thought process that leads to the son's explicit self-revelation: "He'd scrape the fare, I'd be conscripted there, each month he'd get so many dollars while I served, and he'd get ten thousand if I was killed." (57) He tells himself in a simple, unemotional declarative exactly the same thing that his father told Farrell in "excited" simple declaratives. It is the same thing that neither father nor son will discuss directly or simply with each other. The narrator completes the thought in the next paragraph, also composed of a single sentence. "In the darkness of the lavatory between the boxes of crawling worms before we set the night line for the eels I knew my youth had ended." The story began at morning with the narrator telling his father's story of an execution, of a violent end to youth, or a youth. As it moves towards night, he tells his own story, of the end of his own youth. The violence is purely emotional.
- 21 In the beginning of the story, the father rowed and the son hauled in the fishing lines, cutting the eels from their hooks. Now the story has moved from morning, through day to evening, and the positions are reversed. "I rowed as he let out the night line, his fingers baiting each twisted hook so beautifully that it seemed a single movement." The beauty of the father's fingers, performing their task for the final time, contrasts with the bats that make "ugly whirls overhead." The dialogue takes the shape of a combination of questions from the father and repetitions from the son. Once again, they only talk around the subject, although the tone is charged by what the son has overheard, and the fact that the father remains oblivious to his son's newfound insight. The father asks if his son has thought about America, and upon receiving the reply that he has, asks if he's "decided to take the chance" (58). The son replies that he won't be going, to which the father responds: "You won't be able to say I didn't give you the chance when you come to nothing in this fool of a country. It'll be your own funeral." (58) Enclosed in the dark and damp, reeking latrine, and recalling the funeral of Luke Moran, the son has just held his own funeral for his childhood. The unobvious but not inelegant irony is emphasized by the son's echoing response. "It'll be my own funeral," I answered, and asked after a long silence, 'As you grow older, do you find your own days in the war and jails coming much

back to you?" (58) Repetition, silence, war—again, several elements of the story come together in a simple and graceful manner. The son betrays that he knows his father's intentions in sending him to America by subtly linking "my own funeral" with "your own days in the war."

- 22 At this point the story has begun to rewind. Father and son are back on the river, and their conversation has moved not from executions and the 1919 rebellion to America, but from America to executions and the 1919 war. The father's final speech ties together the things he's said from the beginning of the story, and across it.

"I do. And I don't want to talk about them. Talking about the execution disturbed me no end, those cursed buttons bursting into the air. And the most I think is that if I'd conducted my own wars, and let the fool of a country fend for itself, I'd be much better off today. I don't want to talk about it."

- 23 The bursting buttons have ruined another day. Yet the father now, rather than simply refusing to speak further—although he very clearly does that as well, both beginning and ending his speech by saying he doesn't want to talk about it—opens his personal feelings as well. What he fails to realize however is that his "own wars" are inextricable from the wars of "the fool of a country." He has after all been conducting a war with his son across the course of the day, and that war is being conducted in part because of what the country has been doing to "fend for itself," taking the foreign tourists' pounds to the cost of his own fishing license. Had he not fought in 1919, there might not be an Ireland to fend for at all. Nor does he acknowledge the hypocrisy of fighting his own war by trying to send his son to war in a foreign country on behalf of a foreign country. That all these pressures can be borne out in a few straightforward sentences is testament to the construction of the story as a whole. Its various repetitions and images reverberate across each other, within sentences, across paragraphs and from the opening sentence to the final words.

- 24 The end of the story completes the son's transition from blindfolded youth to open-eyed adulthood. Following the father's speech, he relates that "I knew this silence was fixed for ever as I rowed in silence till he asked, 'Do you think, will it be much good tonight?'" (58) Father now defers to the son's knowledge, and it is worth repeating that the son is rowing the boat. As in the morning, it is father who, with a question, breaks the silence, but there is a qualitative difference in the evening. The silence that falls here—in other words, the silence about the wars, both the Irish war that they've spoken about directly and the personal war about which they've only spoken indirectly—is "fixed for ever." Furthermore, the narrator states that he knows this—a blindfold has been removed, and while he may not have yet moved, as his father has, to the cynicism of facing an execution with his hands in his pockets, he now faces his life with his eyes open.

- 25 That knowledge — or maturity — allows the story to end with a paradoxical calm intensity. As throughout the story, this tone is achieved through the combination of repetition, and the juxtaposition of simple, yet direct declaratives. In answer to his father's query about the potential of the fishing, the narrator replies, "It's too calm." The calm makes the father nervous:

"Unless the night wind gets up," he said anxiously.

"Unless the night wind," I repeated. (58)

- 26 This is the last time the two protagonists speak in the story. Although they speak—almost—identical words, one line is infused with anxiety, marked by the hanging preposition and the adverb that colors the speech indicator. The son's repetition is more succinct and

rhythmically regular. It is, indeed, calm, and reflects the state of composure—albeit a state of composure informed by lingering shock—that the son has reached. The final paragraph encapsulates the tension of this new composure—indeed, the tension and intensity of adulthood—through the juxtaposition of two sentences. Each sentence carries an image of their last night of work on the river together. One, however, also contains an image of youth, while the other carries the burden of adulthood. “As the boat moved through the calm water and the line slipped through his fingers over the side I’d never felt so close to him before, not even when he’d carried me on his shoulders above the laughing crowd to the Final.” (58) A story about the death of childhood ends with a nostalgic image of childhood, father and son linked in the innocence, excitement and anticipation of attending a sporting event. This moment was previously the closest he’d felt to his father, but today has changed that. Linked in innocence in his childhood, the son now feels closer to his father than ever before because, his youth ended, they are now linked in maturity, and the contradictions, complexities, and knowledge that maturity brings.

- 27 The final sentence of the story relays this idea sharply, and with a mind-numbing intensity. “Each move he made I watched as closely as if I too had to prepare myself for murder.” (58) In the opening of the story, a naïve boy asked his father to retell a story of execution. Here, at its conclusion, the idea of execution is repeated. It is at once less real in a physical sense and more real in an emotional sense. The son has averted his own military execution by refusing to go to America. On the other hand, he now shares burden of knowledge of death—“I too”—and whatever ideas he may have had about the execution, which his father dismissed as “highfalutin”, have vanished. A death of this sort, whether in Mountjoy in 1919 as reprisal, or in the 1950s in Korea as an American soldier, is a murder in which all sides are complicit. The death of youth and innocence, which cannot be described as murder, since it is inevitable, is likewise a death in which all sides conspire.
- 28 “Korea” is a superficially simple story that reveals its unstated depths upon close reading. It is a masterpiece of economical storytelling, and exhibits the careful use of diction and subtle imagery that made John McGahern one of the outstanding artists of the short story form in the 20th Century.

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RÉSUMÉS

This essay considers “Korea” as a work of narrative poetry. Both the story’s imagery and its many repetitions work to create an elegiac tone that conveys the intertwining themes of death. The death of the narrator’s youth and the death of rural Ireland become inextricably linked through

the patterns of the working day, the story of the execution, and the memory of Luke Moran's funeral. McGahern's subtle manipulation of point of view and the physical locations of his protagonists creates shifts in the structural tension of the story, and lend extra force to its thematic concerns

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