

The Father as a Dominant Figure in John McGahern's *The Dark*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the role of the father figure in John McGahern's novel, *The Dark*. Accordingly, the researcher attempts to examine the relationships between fathers and sons, and the psychological impact of dominant father figures on their children. For the theoretical framework of the study, the researcher draws on the father/child Relationship in psychology. The analytical approach is employed to analyse the father's actions and attitudes towards his family members. Through a close reading of the text, the researcher reaches the conclusion that the father figure in the novel is portrayed as a dominant and oppressive force, leading to the protagonist's psychological and emotional struggles.

The concepts of dominant and oppressive forces are often discussed in various fields, including sociology, politics, and cultural studies. These terms are used to describe power dynamics and the ways in which certain individuals, groups, or institutions exert control over others. The presence of a dominant father figure can significantly shape the identity and development of the characters, especially if the narrative unfolds within a family context. The expectations, values, and behaviours imposed by the dominant father can influence how individuals perceive themselves and their roles in the world. This impact might lead to internal conflicts and struggles for autonomy. Psychological abuse has been linked with negative outcomes such as impaired emotional, social, and cognitive development, including helplessness, aggression, emotional unresponsiveness and neuroticism.

Keywords: father, dominant, family, memory, departure, adulthood

1. Introduction

If the child depends on his mother particularly in the early phases of life to fulfil his primary needs, the father's influence is very important in his children's lives, especially boys. The presence of the father in the family is very important, and his absence can be physically or spiritually damaging. Although the first type is hard to deal with, it is not harder than the physical presence but spiritual absence where there is no mutual interaction between fathers and sons. A father's influence therefore goes beyond physical needs to intellectual, moral, and religious needs.

In Ireland, the general portrait of a father as the head of the family is ambiguous. The traditional image of the father in Irish society in the twentieth century is of an individual who is usually physically and spiritually absent from his children. In the opening lines of *Angela's Ashes: Memoir of Childhood* by Frank McCourt, he describes Irish childhood and its suffering,

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of early childhood, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; the pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (Mccourt 1996: 11)

Kieran McKeown notes the answer of an important Irish psychologist who was asked about the hopes and the future of Irish children in the new millennium: "If we seek a better deal for every child in the third millennium, the difference will be found largely in the quality of fathering" (Mccourt 1996: 39).

The influence of the fathers' backgrounds forms their rigid and tough characters, and this affects their relationships with their sons. This background also affects relationships among Irish Americans (McGrath 1999). Ireland's history is linked to colonization and its control from the late sixteenth century up to 1921: "This history includes suppression of culture and language, religious control, slaughter, rape, famine and mass emigrations of people" (Moane1994: 122). The colonization and post-colonization inheritance influenced Ireland from different perspectives, including economic, cultural, political and social. One of the most significant effects of the British dominance in Ireland is "the complexities within Irish society, and the relationship between Ireland and Britain" (Moane1994: 122). In the light of this background, the study attempts to examine the father-son relationship in Irish society through a close reading and analysis of John McGahern's *The Dark*

2. Literature Review

In *Father & Sons: Patriarchy & the Death Drive in John McGahern's The Dark*, Peter Guy delves into McGahern's themes of family, and the dual roles of fathers as both legal figures and tyrants, offering a fresh perspective through a Lacanian reinterpretation, shedding light on a complex author and a historical era dominated by patriarchy, the church, and family forces. As representations of abuse and violence, Martin Ryle in his article *John McGahern: Memory, Autobiography, Fiction, History* examines *The Dark* and *Amongst Women* explores certain general and political inquiries prompted by the autobiographical naturalism of McGahern, characterized by the paradoxical style of his mature fiction. This style involves recounting personal experiences through a notably detached narrative voice. In *The Dark* and *Amongst Women*, the depictions of abuse and violence should be interpreted in conjunction with the revelations from investigations that have exposed the 'secret'—namely, the unacknowledged prevalence of clerical, institutional, and familial abuse of children in Ireland. In *Fear and Violence- Memory Repressed and Reconfigured in The Dark by John McGahern*, Dana Radler focuses on Fear and memory operate within a framework shaped by personal identity and social roles. This article seeks to examine the novel by employing the perspectives of social and communicative memory theories, establishing connections to the utilization of narrative techniques. The exploration into the protagonist's psyche unfolds as a complex journey, marked by intricate layers of connections and various influencing factors. The inclusion of autobiographical elements adds resonance, particularly within the context of the author's generation or more recent ones. While grounded in a theory widely embraced in literary studies, this approach remains open to diverse interpretations and associations with emerging trends and perspectives. It underscores the enduring value of fiction, extending beyond traditional literary criticism.

The Importance of Families in John McGahern's Novels The Dark, The Barracks and Amongst Women is an extensive analysis of John McGahern's novels, particularly focusing on the themes of family dynamics, power structures, and the influence of the outside world. The essay explores how the characters and relationships evolve across different novels, highlighting the complexity and subtleties of McGahern's portrayal of familial bonds. The analysis delves into the shifting narrative voices, character similarities, and the interplay of fear, memory, and identity within the context of Irish society. Additionally, it discusses the impact of historical events, such as the civil war and the foundation of the Irish state, on the characters' lives. The essay concludes by emphasizing the enduring significance of McGahern's fiction in depicting the multifaceted nature of family life and its reflection of broader societal changes. Martin Keaveney in his article *Silent Noise: Narrative and Style in John McGahern's The Dark* examines a specific scene, Chapter 3, from John McGahern's novel *The Dark*, focusing on the relationship dynamics between a father and his adolescent son in the context of the late-night bedroom. The study delves into the narratological and stylistic elements employed by McGahern, highlighting the symbolic significance of absent/present elements, such as the dysfunctional father and the deceased mother, within the scene. The narrative explores the emotional blockage between the father and son, employing textual and stylistic comparisons with McGahern's nonfiction work *Memoir*. The analysis emphasizes the novel's focus on textual rather than contextual aspects, aiming to elevate McGahern studies beyond socio-political, intertextual, theological, and anthropological frames. The pivotal chapter, marked by a menacing encounter, serves as a transformative moment in the father-son relationship, setting the stage for the boy's progression toward adolescence amid themes of boredom, fears, and spiritual crises. The article contends that McGahern's intricate use of narrative and style in Chapter 3 signifies a significant contribution to the understanding of the characters and the novel's overarching themes. While Siobhan Holland in *Marvellous Fathers in the Fiction of John McGahern* investigates *The Dark* (1965) and *Amongst Women* (1990), which frequently explores the lives of Irish War of Independence veterans, shedding light on how they wield power through verbal, physical, and even sexual violence. Despite their involvement in the War and adherence to masculine ideals, these characters grapple with a sense of compromise and limitation in their post-Independence roles. The portrayal of father figures in McGahern's narratives serves to highlight tensions and instabilities inherent in the construct of an Irish patriarchal social matrix, emphasizing its performative nature and susceptibility to resistance.

The Father/ Child Relationship: A Psychological Insight

Rosenberg and Wilcox in a chapter entitled "Fathers and Their Impact on Children's Well-being" note the influence of the relationship between father and mother and the quality of this relationship on their children. Additionally, if the connection is strong, the father will spend more time with his children, who will also be happier and more emotionally and psychologically stable. Moreover, because of this high-quality relationship, the mother will behave with her children in a better way.

Indeed, the quality of the relationship affects the parenting behaviour of both parents. They are more responsive, affectionate, and confident with their infants; more self-controlled in dealing with defiant toddlers; and better confidants for teenagers seeking advice and emotional support. (Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006: 11)

The child's cognitive ability will be influenced by the type of this relationship as well as its educational achievement. Involved fathers who take care of their children have more intelligent children and they start their school with high standards of academic preparation. Compared to kids with less involved fathers, they are better able to manage their stress and disappointment related to school. These fathers' influence goes beyond toddlers to adolescents and adults. According to Rosenberg and Wilcox, many studies show this type of father results in adolescents "with better verbal skills, intellectual functioning, and academic achievement" (Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006: 11). Children's behaviour is influenced by the type of fathers; involved fathers lead their children to feel safe and to be more confident and have good relationships with their peers. In addition, they will be more sociable and have fewer problems at home, school or with friends. Even the time that the father spends playing with his children has an impact on them. They become more independent and oriented to the

outside world. A good relationship with the father usually leads to children with less depression, "to have good physical and emotional health, to achieve academically, and to avoid drugs, violence and delinquent behaviour" (Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006: 13). Thus, it follows that active fathers have a significant impact on the growth and wellbeing of their offspring. Problems with the children are brought on by the father's dominating and harmful presence.

The American Psychiatric Association states that adolescence or the early years of adulthood are when personality disorder symptoms are first detected. Along with other psychotic diseases, the schizophrenia spectrum is defined by several characteristics. Delusions, hallucinations, disorganised thought (speech), substantially disorganised or aberrant motor conduct (including catatonia), and negative symptoms are the hallmarks of these diseases, according to the DSM 2013 (Cooper 2013: 87). Delusions are rigid ideas and preconceptions that, no matter what, remain unalterable. When delusions point to a person losing control of their body or mind, they start to seem strange. "Perception-like experiences that occur without external stimulus" are what is meant by hallucinations, according to DSM 2013: 87. Delusions are rigid ideas and preconceptions that, no matter what, remain unalterable. When delusions point to a person losing control of their body or mind, they start to seem strange. "Perception-like experiences that occur without external stimulus" are what is meant by hallucinations, according to DSM 2013: 87. The most common hallucinations in schizophrenia are the auditory ones. They often relate to voices that are either familiar or foreign to the person's thoughts. The third area is disorganised thought, which denotes that the person may go from one subject to another and that the solutions may be related or unrelated. The speech sometimes seems jumbled and difficult to understand. Negative symptoms include "diminished emotional expression and a volition" (DSM 2013: 89), in addition to aberrant motor behaviours. According to the DSM-5, this disorder tends to affect men more than women and "may result in greater impairment in them" (DSM 2013: 104) The psychotic symptoms typically manifest between late adolescence and mid-thirties, with "the peak age at onset for the first psychotic episode in the early- to mid- 20s for men" (Cooper 2013: 102).

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act defines child abuse as a "recent act of failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, or serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation" (Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006: 15) to children under 18. Four categories of mistreatment exist; physical abuse, sexual abuse, child neglect and psychological maltreatment. In *Aristocrats*, the father's words to Casimir when he was nine can be considered as physical and psychological abuse. For Rosenberg and Wilcox "The physical and psychological abuse of pre-schoolers and school-aged children is associated with depression, low self-esteem, antisocial behaviour, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminal behaviour" (Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006: 15).

Biller observes "the quality of fathering a child receives even in infancy can have long term psychological implications for females as well males" (Biller 1993: 64). Biller adds that a family with an active and involved father will have secured boys with "a stronger sense of masculine identification" (Biller 1993: 65). He quotes from Samuel Osherson's *Finding our Fathers: The Unfinished Business of Manhood* where Osherson discovered that most of the men he interviewed were in their forties and they missed the sense of being connected to their fathers and their sons as well. He confirms that deprivation of closeness to their fathers during adulthood has affected their relationship with their wives and children (Biller 1993: 68). Overall, communication is the most obvious problem between fathers and sons. Lewis Yablonsky in *Fathers and Sons* concentrates on this problem during three different stages; childhood, adolescence and adulthood. He adds that a lack of communication will lead to a negative father-son relationship. Compassionate and nurturing fathers have a positive influence on the child. Most forms of parental punishment are physical, but parental neglect, as Biller emphasizes, is the most common type of child maltreatment, "more children are negatively influenced by chronic emotional neglect or verbal abuse" (Biller 1993: 85).

3. Discussion and Analysis

The Father as a Dominant Figure in McGahern's *The Dark*

McGahern's *The Dark* was published in 1965. At the same year, it "was targeted by the Censorship of Publications Board" (Wakefield, 69). The novel is about a young man who is unable to make any choices. Here, we see that young Mahoney continues to cling to her path of choice despite the agonizing uncertainty it entails. With the identity of his father, his identity is muddled. Mahoney attempts to separate from his father and forge his unique identity, but this appears to be challenging. In this novel, Mahoney, the narrator, perceives himself as fragmented and many; he sees himself from several angles, and his narration jumps between various points where he refers to himself using different pronouns. "Through the eyes of the teenage narrator," Alarcón-Hermosilla & Montoya-Lázaro remark, "McGahern makes an outrageous ideological statement against Puritanism and Catholicism" (176).

Beginning with violent language and action, the author shows how the main character's memory has been deeply impregnated. The two daughters watch while Mahoney, the father, humiliates his son for using poor terminology by first threatening him and then hitting him:

Now do you think you can bluff your way out of it?'

'I didn't mean, it just came out.'

'The filth that's in your head came out, you mean. Am I'm going to teach you a lesson for once.' [...]

'No, Daddy, no. I didn't mean,' he gave one last whimper but he had to lie in the chair, lie there and wait like a broken animal. Something in him snapped.... He'd never imagined horror such as this, waiting naked for the leather to come down on his flesh, would it ever come, it was impossible and yet nothing could be much worse than this waiting.' (McGahern :7)

The inner conflict brought on by aggressive behaviour is a horrible source of personal upheaval. The main character, a teenager, is utterly

insecure about his experiences, emotions, and social standing. He occasionally tries to put the past behind him, suppresses his emotions, and has persistent remorse over his sexual orientation. His ego is a component of the aforementioned present, the history, and his social relationships, with the outcome being a "self-constructing self, a self that is what it makes of itself" (Woodward: 4).

A home connotes a building with its own set of regulations, which is a mini-society with opportunities, constraints, and secrets from which adolescents can only escape if they get the chance to get a scholarship. Although the narrator expresses the turmoil he is experiencing, he still doubts himself: "But the night and room and your father and even the hedge around the orchard at home were all confusion, there was no beginning nor end" (McGahern.77) , as McGahern himself confesses: "And I see family as a sort of interesting half-way house between the individual on the one side and a larger society on the other hand, and one is not alone, and one is in a society but it's not a true society on the other hand, since certain things will be tolerated within a family that won't be tolerated in a larger society. And of course, we all come out of families, and belong to families." (Gonzalez: 175). When despair and violence take control of him, the young, unnamed youngster does not try to fight his overwhelming feelings; instead, he accepts the situation and believes that his ego is a component of a home with several rooms. The young student attempts to make peace with his father in the novel's epilogue by putting all of their difficult experiences behind them forever and moving their relationship into a more promising future.: ("he wanted to laugh with him and say, "You are marvellous, my father", (McGahern: 160)

The young man, who had worked hard to earn a college scholarship, now finds himself in a similarly perplexing situation: other students are talking about future jobs, employment possibilities, and security, while he is completely uncertain about his studies. He quickly decides to stop studying and look for work because he finds the academic environment to be so dissimilar and challenging in terms of relationships. He is somewhat dissatisfied with his lack of decisiveness, regrets attending university, and finds it temporarily relieving to return home, but is not more excited about the possibility of the upcoming work. He can't live in such an environment; every choice seems to include problems and worries, and he finds it impossible to escape from a harsh background. The novel ends with a cliffhanger, with the father and son returning home and the young man getting ready to start looking for a job the very following day.

Fears based on memories are not just a part of the past, but they are also connected to the shifting present since memory becomes a variable that changes and has many different faces and effects. Taking violence and fear out of their original context and incorporating them into a literary work requires the author to go through a very challenging transformational and acceptance process. Characters go closer to finding peace with the traumatic past as memory continues to function as a construction to be deconstructed and reconstructed, leaving difficult decisions and partially avoided conflicts in the subconscious.

Mahoney's mother died a long time ago, and he and his sisters constantly worry about their violent and erratic father. The majority of the book is on Mahoney's teenage years as he struggles to decide whether to stay at home and work the farm with his father, go to college, or keep his pledge to his late mother and become a priest. The child has a tough time deciding which path to take, and this issue is made worse by the pressures he feels from the figures of authority in his environment as well as his developing and uncontrollable teenage sexuality.

The absence of a neutralising woman in the home is an important factor contributing to The Dark's gloomy atmosphere. The boy exaggerates how lovely his mother is. On the other hand, he feels regret over his broken pledge to her to follow his calling as a priest. The main character in The Dark experiences sexual assault from his father.

Young Mahoney, a disturbed adolescent growing up in the harsh Irish society and culture of the 1950s, is beaten, sexually assaulted, and subjected to several other traumas and humiliations by his father, his priests, and his professors. Four different points of view are represented in each of the thirty-one chapters of this short book in response to these horrific circumstances. This helps readers understand the psychological effects of the events and helps the narrator cope with the pain he experiences.

It is crucial to comprehend the actual workings of the psychological device McGahern employs. A psychologist would most certainly identify young Mahoney as having a dissociative condition based on the textual evidence.: [Dissociation] includes...a loss of personal identity; multiple personalities, in which an individual appears to present two or more different personalities, alternating in control over experience, thought, and action; and depersonalization and derealization, in which the person perceives him- or herself, or the external world, to be unreal or otherwise fundamentally changed" (Kihlstrom, Flisky, &Angiulo, 117).

Quarter-fold dissociation is the form used by Mahoney. His perspective on the events is in the present tense and the first, second, third, and third plural person. The narrator largely reports on the novel's events as they happen because he is unaware of the future and only knows the past. Young Mahoney experiences a milder form of dissociation in which he just distances himself from the upsetting and painful events and enables himself to take control of the situation. His radical worldview appears when there are instances of sexual and physical abuse, but he has other perspectives as well. It is well known that dissociation can cause a variety of serious disorders, including full mental fugues, also known as amnesia, or personality fugues, in which a person adopts multiple distinct personalities, each of which is equipped to handle a different situation and is completely unaware of the existence, memories, and experiences of the other personality. Being repeatedly beaten, sexually assaulted, and subjected to his father's emotional manipulation during his childhood puts our narrator at an even higher risk of developing this type of psychological condition.

The elderly Mahoney will spend a day having fun on the river, fishing with his kids, and the day will be completely pleasant until he grows weary and irritable. This is one illustration of the pain of the young Mahoney. As if a switch were flipped at this point, he starts abusing his children verbally and emotionally. In addition, he might try to play card games with his kids, but when they refuse to

participate, he might act manipulative and immature himself. These unplanned deeds of generosity, mixed with the beatings and sexual trauma described in chapter three, only serve to confuse and complicate the connection between young Mahoney and his father. He consequently develops a more dissociated worldview to comprehend and manage the environment in which he is required to study and develop.

The initial scene depicting a near-beating that is intended to instil terror and full humiliation in a relatively young boy is one of the most common types of general dissociation and may be seen in all types of abuse and trauma victims. He doesn't say how old he is, but based on context clues like the fact that he can curl up in the chair, he must be approximately five years old. His father strips him and sits him in the chair in front of all of his sisters, then pretends to beat him while actually striking the chair's leather arms. For a young child like the narrator, this is a scary and embarrassing event, especially if he loses control of his bodily functions out of fear of really being slapped. One of the most detached voices possible for narration is used in this chapter. The narrator is making an effort to hide the fact that he is sitting in the chair, to act as though he is seeing an unnamed third person being beaten from outside the action, or even to act as though he is not even there. In Chapter 3, the author skilfully uses cryptic wording to suggest that the father and son had inappropriate contact in the evenings and that "*he wanted love.*" (McGahern: 17). In chapter four, the children are made to pick potatoes outside in the rain and storm by their father's rage. If they don't pick the potatoes, their father will punish them, and this makes the kids utterly afraid. In chapter eight, Mahoney's father humiliates and disparages her for the tests and her pursuit of a college scholarship. When his kid has a chance to leave the farm where he is imprisoned, the father appears to be jealous.

One of John McGahern's masterpieces, "*The Dark*," presents several ways to interpret the father character in his literature. The narrative includes both literal and metaphorical father figures, such as superiors and priests. Particularly priests seem to be a perfect target for the father figure because they had enormous power in Ireland, especially during the Irish War of Independence.

On the first page of "*The Dark*", the father uses harsh words to punish his son physically. This asserts that the book was banned and that McGahern lost his job as a teacher, a position that was overseen by the Roman Catholic Church. According to Neil Corcoran, the novel is the ideal representation of McGahern's writing since it deals with "rural Irish hatred and self-pity, that obscuring and obscurantist darkness through which all of [the] characters must fumble

their way." (88). Additionally, As David Malcolm argues, *The Dark* functions as "*a complex piece of psychological portraiture and a despairing vision of life . . . [which] comments indirectly and directly on social life in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s.*"

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be concluded that Mahoney's strained relationship with his father and the sense of confinement in his father's home are pivotal elements that define both him and his life. The statement "Nothing seemed to matter anymore" encapsulates Mahoney's perception of enduring years of physical and emotional abuse within his home (McGahern: 10), with the implication that this suffering would persist as long as he remained with his father. The negative environment cultivated by Mahoney Sr. has a profound and seemingly insurmountable impact on Mahoney's life. Paradoxically, the violence and hostility within this environment become the driving force behind Mahoney's determination to break free, embark on a personal journey, and carve out a new life for himself. Despite being unable to change the abuse inflicted by his father, Mahoney firmly resolves never to emulate him. Instead, he commits to charting his own course, expressing a dedication to "walk [his] way through life towards the unnameable heaven of joy, not his father's path" (25). The depicted violence in "*The Dark*" undeniably fuels Mahoney's quest for independence, motivated by Mahoney Sr.'s frequent mistreatment of his children, compelling Mahoney to leave his father's house and free himself from the elder man's control.

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