

MAMMIES, TROLLOPS, AND RE-CLAIMERS OF THE NIGHT: WOMEN IN PATRICK MCCABE'S FICTION

David Clark

Patrick McCabe's fictional world is one which, it may be argued, is centred on a series of male characters who are ironically juxtaposed as dysfunctional figures within an imperfect social milieu. The tension which arises between the fictional character and his environment is created by a deceptively complex narrative pattern, a pattern which is largely anchored in the memory of a particular time and place which evoke the childhood, adolescence, and/or youth of the male protagonist. The literal reality of these factors is, however, largely unimportant in comparison with the perception of these as felt by the character, a perception which he (for it is always a he) considers to be his "memory" of that time and place. It is, of course, of great importance to differentiate between the character's perception of the past and the events as the reader discerns them after breaking down the layers of narrative inconsistency which reflect the dislocated consciousness of the principal character. Memory, in the works of McCabe, is always related to two principal factors, that of place – the physical landscape in which the memories are rooted – and that of the female character, intrinsically linked to that place, whose dominance over the male protagonist is such that all memory is filtered through his experiences with the female, generally the mother or the "anti-mother."

The memory, therefore, of McCabe's characters is always intrinsically untrustworthy. They are unreliable both as narrators and as characters, in that they provoke the reader into erroneous conceptions, which are only dissipated by the reader's own processing of the "facts" as they are presented. Time and place are used with great skill to create the illusion of "reality." A myriad of references, from historical events to artefacts drawn from popular culture, explicitly place the action of the novel within a particular period, such as the early 1960s with the Cuban missile crisis, cheap comics, and the signs of Seán Lemass' "new Ireland" in *The Butcher Boy*, or the musical and fashion trends of the 1970s in *Carn*, *Breakfast on Pluto*, and *The Dead School*. Such exactitude provides a contrast with the usually confused consciousness of the main protagonist. Similarly, although McCabe's geographical landscape is composed of a series of non-existent small towns in the Irish heartland, these locations are instantly recognisable. McCabe steers clear of the romanticism of the traditional ideal of rural Ireland, but also of the urban vision of the modern Republic. His, rather, is the claustrophobic memory of the stifling mid-sized communities with their prejudices, entrapment, and hypocrisy.

The main characters that inhabit the fictional landscape of McCabe's novels are, as we have noted, dysfunctional males, but their memory (and thus the consciousness

from which their attitudes and actions evolve) is rooted in the relationship with a member of the other sex, most notably with the mother, the mother substitute, and/or the implied antithesis of the mother figure. Despite, therefore, the apparently male-centred perspective of McCabe's fiction, the role of the female characters which populate his work cannot be understated.

Generally speaking, the representations of womanhood which appear in his fiction can be grouped into three main types. Most important are the maternal figures – the "mammies" – central to the emotional life (or lack of it) of their sons and who are regularly searched for throughout the lives of the male protagonists, often re-appearing as girlfriends, wives, or fantasy figures. The prostitutes (or "trollops") – the apparent antithesis of the maternal ideal, frequently – and paradoxically – share this maternal territory, creating a web of confusion, denial, and self-doubt which invariably interferes with the desires and aspirations of the protagonists. The memory of the mother and the fantasy memory of the perfect partner are continually used to shape the structure of the weak male characters whose "place" (both geographically and socially) within society is conditioned by women, who are always stronger, more astute, and responsible for much of the originality and tension present in McCabe's fiction.

In McCabe's first novel, *The Butcher Boy* (1992), the figure of the mother is typically idealised. Francie, the young protagonist, states early in the novel that "me and ma were great pals" (5), but she suffers from a severe mental illness. After her "break-downs," her son believes that she is taken to the garage to be repaired. As is common in McCabe's work, the father is a useless drunkard who plays a negative role in the emotional development of the child. Guilt, one of the main themes in McCabe, appears when Francie, after running away to Dublin, returns with a present of reconciliation for his mother to be cruelly informed that she has committed suicide. Francie, typically, blames himself for his mother's death. As Nancy Chodorow (176) famously states, boys are "taught to be masculine more consciously than girls are taught to be feminine," but, as she stresses, the absence of a valid male role model can lead the male child to identify more closely with the mother figure than with the father. In such cases, therefore, it is not abnormal for the boy to resort to a female role model. The negative model provided by the father leads Francie to a rejection of masculine culture, a rejection which is reinforced by the usurpation of his friendship with Joe by Philip Nugent, aided and abetted by both Francie's own mother and Philip's mother, Mrs Nugent. This is further exacerbated by his sexual mistreatment at the hands of the priest at the Industrial School to which he is sent. The death of his mother and his own guilt for this precludes the adoption of a secondary mother figure and will eventually lead to Francie's murdering Mrs Nugent.

The relationship of the child with the "mammy" as described by Chodorow is of fundamental importance in *The Dead School* (1995), a story of two teachers from two different generations. Malachy Dudgeon is a young teacher with "modern" perspec-

tives on the educational system, while Raphael Bell, a representative of the first post-Independence generation, is strongly opposed to the "modernity" which he believes to be ruining his patently De Valeran perspective of Ireland. Raphael's mother is extremely proud of her son. From the West Cork countryside, she is a "shawlie," a "fat woman in a plaid shawl" (34), who, after her husband is killed by a Black and Tan, like Francie's mother in the previous novel, degenerates into insanity. Malachy, on the other hand, is affected by his mother's infidelity – she is converted into a "trollop" in the public opinion because of her sexual infidelities with Jemmy, a farmer, down at the boathouse, which results in his father's suicide and which will later be repeated in his own life as the love of his life, Marion, repeats this infidelity.

Bell's obsession with his "mammy" is typical of that suffered by many of McCabe's characters:

Back then to the house, out of breath and all excited and in your hand this time a lovely stick of barley sugar for your mammy! "Now there's a good boy doesn't forget his mother!" said Uncle Joe. "Our Raphael always thinks of his mammy, don't you Raphael?" said his daddy. "That's a sign of a good child," said Uncle Joe, packing baccy into his pipe while Raphael's mammy beamed and the happiest child in the world sat down by the window [...] (37)

Malachy's obsession, in contrast, is based on the shame and disgust which he feels at his "mammy's" betrayal of the family values. Ironically, but typically, once again in McCabe both characters seek partners who reflect the dominant characteristics of their "mammies." Bell's wife, the Northern-born Nessa, is docile and maternal, while Malachy's partner, Marion, repeats the infidelity of his mother. Again the absence (in Bell's case), or the weakness (in that of Malachy), of the father is fundamental to an understanding of their behaviour. Both characters base their lives on the memory of the mother, a memory which conditions their being in a way which shapes their personality. Thus, Bell's life is dedicated to doing the things that he believes his mother would have liked, whereas Malachy's resentment of his mother's sexual infidelity and of his father's failure to act converts him into a pathetic figure: indecisive, aggrieved, and bitter.

The obsession with the mother in *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) is based on childhood abandonment. Patrick Braden is the illegitimate son of a priest and his young housekeeper who has been left in the care of the "baby-farmer," Whiskers Braden or "Hairy Ma" – a typical stout-slugging Players-smoking "shawlie." Pat's reaction to the situation is an attempt to convert himself into a version of his mother, someone whom his fantasy has turned into someone "so beautiful she looked not unlike Mitzi Gaynor" (8). He starts by cross-dressing, wearing foster-sister Caroline's dresses at the age of thirteen, and stealing Mrs O'Hare's "smalls" from the clothes-line. He then leaves his foster-home to start a relationship with the corrupt politician and gun-runner, Mr Dummy Teat, who likes to use Patrick as a mother substitute calling him "mammy": "'Oh. Mammy!,' he'd say when he got in one of his moods and I came up with the idea of inserting my thumb into his mouth. It was quite a spontaneous gesture on my

part – but, oh boy, did he love it! 'Oh, Mammy, Mammy!' He'd cry, sucking away on it like nobody's business!" (34).

After her lover's murder, Pat moves to London to work as a transvestite prostitute where, in a climate of anti-Irishness provoked by the IRA bomb campaign, he is mistreated by his customers, almost at one point being strangled to death. Following his obsession with the figure of his mother, he starts a strange relationship with his landlady, Louise, a widow whose son (of Irish father, Shaunie) has died and who uses Pat as a substitute for her dead son, while Pat calls Louise "mammy." "'Oh my silly boy, my Shaunie Shaunies!' she'd say, and I'd say 'Mammy!' After a while I started to really like it, just sitting there on her knee and being engulfed by all this powdery warm flesh. I never wanted to get up in fact" (91).

Dave Smith notes how feminist theory has shown that women are "oppressed/hidden/repressed/marginalized" by male-centred "social and psychical structures" which "place biological men as enforcing agents for these structures," but which, at the same time, give women the *privilege* "to escape them or to be displaced by them" (34). Pat is a biological male who, unlike the biological woman, is not "privileged" to escape or reject this and thus is stranded in a "no-person's-land" of confusion and guilt. The invented memory of the mother evokes what Marianne Hirsch has called "a myth of female separateness which underscores value and empathy" (134), to which Pat aspires, but to which he can never gain admission. The end of the novel shows Pat converted into an imitation of his "mammy," an "Old Mother Reilly" dressed in a housecoat and headscarf, converted at last into his own mother and "wired to the fucking moon" (198).

Both *Mondo Desperado* (1999) and *Emerald Germs of Ireland* (2001) highlight obsessions with the figure of the "mammy." The first, a series of inter-related short stories, boasts such magnificent examples as "The Bursted Priest." A young boy who wishes to become a priest is – in the literal sense of the word – blown up by a group of schoolmates. The boy, Declan, is typically obsessed with his overweening mother, who "knitted him a grey balaclava with matching tasselled woollen scarf which she had persuaded his teacher Master Petey to allow him to wear for the duration of the school day" (23).

This repeats the recurrent McCabe theme of the mammy who over-protects her child leaving him open to weaknesses, public ridicule, and alienation, as well as mental problems or obsessive and/or compulsive behaviour. At the end of the tale Mammy is "eating flies in St Jude's Nursing Home, insisting that she is pregnant with a little girl who is going to be a nun," but the people of Barntrosna, the small town where all the stories in the collection are set, insist that "if Mrs Coyningham had left things the way they were and never minded about the bloody old balaclava, Fr Declan would be above in the chapel saying Mass this Sunday" (27).

Emerald Germs of Ireland is arguably one of the most under-rated works of Irish fiction of the present decade. A series of murder ballads in prose, the "novel" – if such it can be called – is a "biography" of Pat McNab, a mass-murderer (or not), obsessed, predictably, with his mammy. The work relies on a permanent confusion between reality and fantasy – which reflects the confusion of Pat's own mind, ironically reflected upon by the multi-voiced narrator throughout the novel, which, in keeping with McCabe's style, does not fit comfortably into any narrative character. His relationship with his "mammy" can be summed up in the following extract: "Just as Pat daren't open his mouth to his mother about most things, for no matter what you said to Mammy (as he always called her, for as far back as he could remember) she always seemed to take it up as you saying: 'Well then! That's the end of our relationship, I guess! I'll be off to live my own life! Toodle-oo!'" (4).

This is, of course, typical of McCabe's mummies; hysterically over-reacting to any sign of independence shown by their sons, who are typically forced to plead forgiveness through a feeling of intense guilt. The ironic narrative voice always tries to rationalise the totally irrational: "but there is something special about the relationship we all have with our mothers" (6). Pat murders his mother with a saucepan, and the series of subsequent murders, fantasies, and hallucinations are all related to the omnipresent figure of the "mammy," whose influence on her son from ultra-tomb is every bit as strong as it was when she was alive.

In McCabe's penultimate novel, *Call Me the Breeze* (2003), the "mammy" situation is further complicated in the psyche of the "wannabee" Charles Manson cum Travis Bickle sociopath narrator, Joey, from his mobile home in the non-existent border town of Scotsfield. The fragmented structure of the novel slowly reveals the relationship between Joey, his "mammy," his father, and the mysterious figure of Mona. Joey's "mammy" is hospitalised in a vegetative state, while Mona is present throughout the novel. *The Life and Times of Doughboy McBlob*, Joey's best-selling autobiographical novel, reveals the "truth" behind her situation:

Mona Galligan was in love with my father. She aborted her baby and became an alcoholic sometime in the 1950s. Then she drowned herself in the reservoir. I loved her very much and used to go to her house every day. When my mother would be cursing my father. It was with Mona Galligan that I first experienced the hunger for rebirth into a world transformed. They threw her baby – or what was left of it – into the sea off Howth Head near Dublin. She told me that one time when she was drunk. I don't think she knew she was telling me. They used to call her the Chivers jelly. Mona Chivers jelly was what they would call her because she shook so much with the gin. (166)

Joey, it would seem, had visited Mona every day after school, effectively converting his father's mistress into a surrogate "mammy." He wanted "to climb inside her stomach so [he] could become her baby" (93), while she thought that he could be born again to her. After Mona's death, Joey continues the relationship with an inflatable doll with a black wig. Mangan, an elderly tramp who lives in a caravan near that of Joey, discovers his secret:

Pulling at yourself and talking in women's voices ... I seen you putting a wig on her! A long black wig – I seen it! ... Through yon window. I seen what you be doing! Calling out her name! Mona! Mona! I know who you were talking about, sure enough! I seen her about the town, years ago, same black hair and all! Yes! That's what youse be at, you and her! You and your Mrs...Mona! Oh aye, Mona Galligan, that fired herself into the reservoir! Aye! Riding the dead! Riding the dead – that's your game and don't tell me any different! For these eyes don't lie – dressing her up and talking to her. (88-89)

McCabe's characters, like Joey, are continually in search of a surrogate "mammy." If the "mammy" is still alive, she tends to discourage her son's attempts to form a "normal" relationship with another woman. If the mother is dead (or in a vegetative state), the same discouragement will be produced by the feelings of guilt instilled within the son by the memory of the "mammy" and her ethical code. For McCabe's mammies, the most obvious conclusion to be drawn about the woman who tries to usurp her son's love is that she is a "trollop." "Trollop" is defined by the *OED* as "a slattern, slut; also, sometimes a morally loose woman, a trull." In McCabe's milieu, moreover, "trollop" is a term which is applied to the woman, a member of the community, who has, in fact or by common consensus, transgressed, or is thought likely to be able to transgress at some point, a series of sexual norms held by that community and most specifically by its moral guardians, the mammies. "Trollops" in these terms can range from Mona, who has had sexual relationships with Joey's ne'er-do-well father, to Josie, in McCabe's second novel *Carn* (1989), who, despite being herself a victim of sexual cruelty, is considered to be a "trollop." The fact that both of these women have been severely mistreated by apparently "respectable" men does not save them from being tarnished with the epithet of "trollop." Society, in applying such a term, visits the crimes of its men-folk on their victims, something which is obviously harshly reminiscent of some of the darker episodes in recent Irish history, most notably, but not exclusively, that of the Magdalene Sisters.

In his study on social response to prostitution, Andrew Ross focuses on the case of Peter Sutcliffe, the "Yorkshire Ripper," to analyse the hypocritical standards which are used to judge prostitution. When police, press, and public believed that Sutcliffe singled out prostitutes as his victims, the social reaction was hypocritically mute. As Ross says, the "mission to kill all prostitutes was recognised notoriously, at all levels of interpretation, from that of the popular press to that of the professional lawyer, as a moral mission, and therefore less culpable than the asocial desire to kill 'all women'" (48). Thus, society judged between "the 'blemished' or 'disreputable' victims, as opposed to the 'innocent' victims, implying, of course, that the former deserved to die while the 'innocent' did not" (Ross 49). "Trollops" in McCabe's fiction are subject to both verbal abuse from the women and the physical abuse from the men in the communities in which they reside and, like Sutcliffe's victims, are judged according to the restrictive moral views of society.

The world of women is, it would therefore appear, thus far divided into a world of mammies (over-protective mother figures who are socially dysfunctional themselves, but who nevertheless represent the accepted norms of the community) and trollops

(women who are part of the community but who are rejected by that community because of real or perceived sexual deviance from the social precepts). What, it might be asked, if the women do not fit into either category? Surprisingly, these are few and far between in McCabe's work, but those who escape such categorisation are worthy of study. The most significant example of this third grouping is Ms Evans in *The Dead School*. Ms Evans arrives at the school where Raphael Bell is maintaining the "good old Irish traditions" and where Malachy Dudgeon is having problems with both his pupils and their "mammies." Evans is the representative of the Parents' Committee set up by the "ridiculous, new-fangled Department of Education regulations" (158) and her plans for the school, where Bell is headmaster, include the abolition of the compulsory carrying of rosary beads, the abolition of school uniforms, and of compulsory sports. A pro-abortionist, Evans admits publicly to having had an abortion herself. The resulting reactions by the traditionalist Bell are predictable:

I mean if someone in training college in 1931 or '32 had said to Raphael, "You're going to work your back off for the children of Ireland and it's all going to be destroyed on you by a woman who had an abortion," he would have laughed himself sick. If he had even known what an abortion was, that is, which he didn't. If there were such things as abortions in 1932, then Raphael Bell didn't know about them. He was too busy saying the rosary with Paschal O'Dowd and running around the place visiting the sick. (157)

Evans – the "anti-mammy" – she who, according to Bell's logic, kills rather than conceives, provokes Bell's decline into alcohol and insanity. Despite her progressive outlook, however, she is not portrayed as a "positive" character within the novel. Her fictional role is rather to act as Bell's nemesis than to bring any degree of optimism into the sad, repressed state of the Irish Republic in the 1970s. Despite organising an anti-rape march to "Reclaim the Night,"¹ McCabe's depiction of Evans is far from the figure of the altruistic leftist that she tries to convey.

It is difficult to encounter "positive" characters anywhere in McCabe's fiction. Indeed, the only characters with any dignity are certain females who avoid being placed overtly into McCabe's somewhat rigid categories. In *Carn*, Sadie is a rebellious girl whose positive outlook is eventually defeated by the twin vicissitudes of motherhood and terrorism. Josie, in the same novel, is also conditioned by motherhood – or lack of this, because of her self-inflicted abortion, but her independence and integrity are apparent until her death. Outside this early work, however, it is not easy to find characters with positive connotations.

An exception is to be seen in the figure of Noreen in the eponymous story "The Forbidden Love of Noreen Tiernan," which closes *Mondo Desperado*. Noreen, the perfect village girl, refuses to become a model and goes to London to train to be a

1 Interestingly, according to Ross the "Reclaim the Night" marches were begun by feminists in the wake of the Sutcliffe murders as a result of the police poster which stated, "The next victim may be innocent." McCabe ironically jibes, therefore, at the hypocrisy of self-proclaimed radicals such as Ms Evans who in fact share the hypocritical distinction between prostitutes and "innocent" women.

nurse. Against all seeming odds, Noreen initiates a lesbian sado-masochist affair with a fellow nurse. Word of the scandal reaches her village, Barntrosna, and a group which can be seen as an ironic cross-section of Irish society, consisting of her mammy, the parish priest, her boyfriend and a local protestant landowner, go to England to rescue her. Noreen apparently sees the error in her debauched ways and returns to marry Pobs – but misses her relationship with Steph, the butch lesbian, to whom she returns.

Noreen's mammy had been warned by a neighbour, Mrs Donnelly, about the dangers of letting her daughter go to London: "Tramps, whoremasters, madmen, the whole lot of them! Every low form of life that God put on this earth is to be found there – waiting for the likes of you and me! Waiting for her – Noreen! Your daughter!" (190).

The head nurse explains the situation to Mrs Tiernan:

She turned out to be quite a little madam, didn't she – your little daughter! Coming here with the sweet Miss Colleen Irish act – butter wouldn't melt in her mouth – and the next thing you know she's involved not only in lesbian affairs but waylaying unsuspected people right, left and centre! No, nursing wasn't good enough for her! Or for that half-man, half-woman trollop she took up with! Couldn't be satisfied with an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, could she, no, it had to be mugging, if you don't mind, razor gangs, drugs and God knows what else! (213)

Noreen is, in social terms, certainly in the social terms of Barntrosna, deviant, but it must be insisted that as a character she is positive within the terms of McCabe's fiction. She compares favourably with the other characters in the story who, in typical McCabe fashion, all have unconfessed sexual hang-ups – Eustace De Vere-Bingham with his "Alicia" fantasies, the sexual inadequacy of Noreen's boyfriend Pobs, the closet homosexuality of the Priest, the cross-dressing local bank manager found in a London club. So in her own – slightly exaggerated – way, Noreen reclaims the night by making her own choice and returning to Steph, her girlfriend, and her sadomasochistic relationship.

McCabe's negative treatment of the Irish woman in his fictional oeuvre must obviously be seen in terms of the author's fictional conception of the human condition. Mother Erin is not a viable concept for this writer, his Cathleen Ni Houlihan would force her children to wear scratchy balaclavas and grey tasselled scarves – in the classroom. Through comic stereotypes, however, I would suggest that McCabe reflects, hyperbolically, the prejudices, shortcomings, maliciousness, and frustration of ordinary Irish men and women in a way few contemporary writers would dare.

Works Cited

- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. 1978. London: University of California Press, 1999.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989.
- McCabe, Patrick. *Breakfast on Pluto*. London: Picador, 1998.
- . *The Butcher Boy*. London: Picador, 1992.
- . *Call Me the Breeze*. London: Faber, 2003.
- . *Carn*. New York: Delta, 1989.
- . *The Dead School*. London: Picador, 1995.
- . *Emerald Germs of Ireland*. London: Picador, 2001.
- . *Mondo Desperado*. London: Picador, 1999.
- The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. 20 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Ross, Andrew. "Demonstrating Sexual Difference." *Men in Feminism*. Ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith. London: Routledge, 1987. 47-53.
- Smith, Dave. "Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory." *Men in Feminism*. Ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith. London: Routledge, 1987. 33-40.