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## **‘Waiting’ for the ‘Arrival’ of the ‘Text’: Poetics in John McGahern’s *The Dark***

**Martin Keaveney**

Samuel Beckett famously exploited ‘Waiting’ as a ‘dramatic’ event in *Waiting for Godot* in 1953.<sup>1</sup> This achievement quickly made Beckett one of the most celebrated practitioners of twentieth-century drama. But what effect did Beckett’s use of waiting as a device have on writers of literature in the following years? This paper takes the work of one of Beckett’s descendants in Irish fiction writing, John McGahern, and measures his use of narratological and stylistic elements to create the poetic effects of ‘Waiting’, ‘Arrival’ and ‘Patience’ in one of his early novels, *The Dark* (1965).<sup>2</sup> The novel is already notable for its immediate banning in Ireland as a result of its content, which included priests talking about sex, underage masturbation and implied child abuse. However, relevant here are the novel’s textual qualities rather than its external receipt or even its positioning in the context of Ireland’s development as a country post-independence. That area of McGahern studies has already been quite exhausted by the scholars who have published books on the Co. Leitrim writer and readers can refer to James Whyte and Eamon Maher along with many articles written on McGahern and his relationship to state, church and indeed the landscape of his native country.<sup>3</sup> Here, we are concerned with the McGahern text and how through the use of poetic manipulation, the dead, inanimate scenes become animated. Some useful work has already been done by Richard Robinson and Stanley van der Ziel, while Frank Shovlin has written on McGahern’s

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot, The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986) (re-issue 2006), pp.7–89.

<sup>2</sup> John McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965). Subsequent in-text citations will be to this edition, with the page numbers in brackets.

<sup>3</sup> See James Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002); Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to The Universal* (Dublin: Liffey, 2003); and Eamon Maher, *The Church and Its Spire’: John McGahern and the Catholic Question* (Blackrock: Columba, 2011). For articles, see Peter Dockery, ‘Writing Out of Love: McGahern and the Influence of the Mother’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 99.394 (Summer, 2010), pp.205–218; Belinda McKeon, ‘Beyond Chronicle: The Deceptive Realism of John McGahern’s Fiction’, *American Journal of Irish Studies*, 8 (2011), pp.77–92; Val Nolan, ‘If it was just th’oul book . . .’: a history of the McGahern banning controversy’, *Irish Studies Review* (2011): 19:3, pp.261–279; Gerald Lynch, ‘A “Fragile Interdependence”: John McGahern’s *That They May Face the Rising Sun*’, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 36.2. (Fall/Autumn 2010), pp.160–175; Jose Lanters, ‘“It Fills Many a Vacuum”: Food and Hunger in the Early Novels of John McGahern’, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 20.1. (Jul. 1994) pp.30–40; Siobhan Holland, ‘Marvellous Fathers in the Fiction of John McGahern’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*. 35. (2005), pp.186–198.

influences.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean we will ignore the dynamics between characters or objects of state, church and *mise-en-scène*. Rather, we will concern ourselves with the textual way those elements and their use further and stylise the narrative. McGahern himself hinted at this route of scholarship to his work: ‘If [any artist] is a great writer, his work is shaped in the writing itself first of all, and then in successive re-reading and the intervention of specific poetic elements, which bypass ideological notions’.<sup>5</sup>

Relevant to this paper is the application of ‘eventlessness’ in *The Dark* and how this is converted into ‘event’. In van der Ziel’s 2016 book, he attends to McGahern’s interplay with his predecessors, ranging from Shakespeare to Beckett. He devotes two pages late in that volume to the use of waiting and writes that ‘(w)aiting is a constant concern in [McGahern’s] fiction’. (*Imagination of Tradition* 237) However, while van der Ziel progresses his discussion of waiting in McGahern to other sections of the oeuvre, the theme of waiting is ubiquitous in *The Dark* and further analysis is required to properly appreciate its contribution to the effect of the novel.

The sense of ‘Waiting’ in *The Dark* is present in the macro sequencing of the novel, semantic attachments at the outset of many chapters and instances of episodic mini-series later toward the end of the narrative. This strategy maximises the effect of an imminent ‘event’. Chapter 1 opens with Young Mahoney being hauled up the stairs for the emitting of a swear word. At the height of Mahoney’s fury, he tells the boy as he waits for punishment: ‘I’ll give your arse something it won’t forget in a hurry’’. (9) The boy is stripped in front of his sisters, forced to bend over a chair and wets himself as he waits to be beaten with a leather belt. However, his father only strikes the belt against the chair and the boy is dispatched in disgrace. The chapter is, indeed, ‘in a hurry’, but never gets to its destination, that of the crystallised beating and this hybridises the overall sense of ‘Waiting’ for something which never literally arrives. Even when it semantically does, it is different from what is expected, an effect which will be ubiquitous in the novel. Van der Ziel’s discussion of McGahern’s use of ‘Waiting’ notes: ‘[T]he *anticipation* of pain, he [the boy] discovers, is much worse than pain actually experienced’ (*Imagination of Tradition* 238) and he quotes *The Dark*’s lines: ‘He’d never imagined horror such as this, waiting naked for the leather to come down on his flesh, would

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard, Robinson, *John McGahern and Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2017). Stanley van der Ziel, *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2015). Frank Shovlin, *Touchstones: John McGahern’s Classical Style* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).  
<sup>5</sup> John McGahern, ‘A Literature without Qualities’, *Love of The World*, Ed. Stanley van der Ziel, (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), pp.181–184.

it ever come, it was impossible and yet nothing could be much worse than this waiting'. (9) The 'Waiting' then is heightened poetically in the very first chapter in a way which proclaims the intensive 'non-events' of the novel to come.

This sense of impending doom is replicated within the arrangement of chapters in the novel and its individual semantic attachments, usually found at the outset. For example, in Chapter 3 young Mahoney is also waiting, this time in the bedroom he shares with his father. He tries to pass the time by counting ceiling boards, the number of which he already knows. In the kitchen he can hear his father's late-night preparations for bed and begins to visualise them: 'The dreams and passing of time would break with the noise of the hall door opening, feet on the cement, his habitual noises as he drank barley water over the dying fire, and at last the stockinged feet on the stairs'. (17) When his father does arrive, the subsequent abuse is highly traumatic for the boy, more so than if the belt had connected in Chapter 1. Chapter 5 begins with young Mahoney lying in his bed, waiting for the 'one day' a girl would come. While he waits, he must make do with a photo of the girl while masturbating into a sock. At the outset of Chapter 7, the boy waits for his turn amongst the sinners at confessions in the church. The scene becomes fantastical in its non-eventness; there is over a page of description before it develops into a dream-like fantasy of a prisoner approaching execution.

This sense of 'Waiting' is also expanded into wider chapter-series as the novel progresses. This can be identified as he waits for the Leaving Cert examination, a process which is brutally outlined from Chapter 18 to 21, via Christmas, Easter and the days beforehand. Near the end of the novel, the boy is left to wait for Mahoney to come and direct his final decision to leave the university for the E.S.B. This saga is played out over the final three chapters.

McGahern has been described by Denis Sampson as arranging scenes in a plotless non-sequential way, describing them in his early study as 'Discontinuous Scenes'.<sup>6</sup> Yet the sequencing of these apparently unrelated scenes engineers the 'event' within the 'eventlessness'. Eamon Grennan has thoughtfully written that McGahern's early novels are 'moved forward by a very tangible concentration on a series of significant and extended moments, each one attended to in all its vigorous materiality' (19).<sup>7</sup> It is true each chapter contributes usefully to the novel message. But this analysis can be developed much further by

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<sup>6</sup> Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye – The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p.68.

<sup>7</sup> Eamon Grennan, 'Only What Happens: Mulling over McGahern', *Irish University Review*, 35.1 (Spring-Summer 2005), pp.13–27.

closer textual probing. Tzvetan Todorov's chapter 'The Grammar of Narrative' in *The Poetics of Prose* (1977) provides the narratological and stylistic tools with which to decipher the McGahern methods of eventlessness, initially provoking the simple translation of 'Waiting'.<sup>8</sup> Todorov declares that '(n)o narrative is natural; a choice and a construction will always preside over its appearance; narrative is a discourse, not a series of events'. (55) Most usefully from a perspective of disseminating the mechanics of McGahern's work, Todorov differentiates between episodes which operate in the sense of a narrative 'verb' and a narrative 'adjective':

The minimal complete plot consists in the passage from one equilibrium to another. An "ideal" narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. [...]

Consequently there are two types of episodes in a narrative: those which describe a state (of equilibrium or of disequilibrium) and those which describe the passage from one state to the other. [...]

This definition of the two types of episodes (and hence of propositions designating them) permits us to relate them to two parts of speech, the adjective and the verb. (111)

For the purposes of *The Dark*, it seems clear that rather than these 'non-events' of waiting being disconnected, they are adjectives, macro-narrative-adjectives to be more specific, in the overall narrative. Similarly, the action scenes where 'something' occurs are, in fact, macro-narrative-verbs. McGahern's careful arrangement of each chapter would support this reading. However, I would go further and say McGahern's style in *The Dark* propels a combination of macro-narrative-verb+adjective, in that these empty waiting scenes both adjectivise the narrative, but also progress it subtly and effectively. This relates to both their macro structure as in the case of Chapter 1, but also in their declarative attachments at the outset as in Chapters 3, 5 and 7 and in their episodic accomplishment of theme, as in Chapters 18 to 21 and the final three chapters. They propagate an event contingent with a state of being, but also simultaneously provide an event of passage. If each 'Waiting' event outlined is read in this way, the bedroom in Chapter 3 and 5, the confessional boxes, the opening promised beating, the preparation for the exams and the later call to Mahoney, these 'acts/non-acts' both provide us with a state in a narrative sense but also with an event or a change to the

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<sup>8</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, Trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977).

status quo. For further development of the narrative and stylistic strategy of the ‘Waiting’ emphasis in *The Dark*, it is necessary now to explore the micro-structure; the lexical and semantic vision as exemplified in the micro-text. By ‘micro-text’, I mean the syntactical texturing of work to propagate the effect, in this case the sense of ‘Waiting’. This is relevant in both the linguistic itemisation of both verbs and adjectives to imply theme but also the semantic placement of elements in the episodes themselves.

The novel opens with the boy awaiting a punishment for cursing. As Richard Robinson has noted, the manifested curse spelt out as ‘F-U-C-K’ is excluded from the text, perhaps a reflection of the famous non-arrival of Godot over a decade earlier. (56) And despite the punishment or implied punishment young Mahoney goes through in Chapter 1, he never actualises a swear word through the novel and it is untypical of his muted character to emit one. The waiting then for this coarseness in language is one of the vents which never becomes realised. It might be read as the boy’s spiritedness never becoming apparent in the novel. Even when he does challenge Mahoney in Chapter 6, it is awkward and restrained.

In Chapter 3, we learn: ‘The worst was to have to sleep with him the nights he wanted love, strain of waiting for him to come to bed, no hope of sleep in the waiting – counting and losing the count of the thirty-two boards across the ceiling, trying to pick out the darker circles of the knots beneath the varnish.’ (17) As the boy waits for his father in the bed they share, the verb to wait is repeated twice literally, but also the thematic ‘Waiting’ of the answer to a number of boards which he already knows is engineered. In the same way as the outcome of life is known, the character must pursue it regardless of the final outcome of death. Shortly after the boy’s waiting is embellished semantically through his father’s late-night ritual, where sound is used as a visual aid. He waits and does not see, but the hearing ironically provides him with sufficient sight. Again, existential undertones resound. Although the fact of death is clear to us all and we ‘hear’ it, nothing is known about the experience of ‘death’, and we never ‘see’ it. The literal waiting returns: ‘He was coming and there was nothing to do but wait and grow hard as stone and lie.’ (17). Chapter 3’s waiting opening proclaims, within the syntactical structure and semantical placement, the waiting that will reverberate textually around the novel.

Further linguistic implication is found in the slang for orgasm within the opening line of Chapter 5: ‘One day, she would come to me.’ (30) He is joined in the scene by an inanimate photograph, which he animates: ‘An ad. torn from the *Independent* by my face on the pillow,

black and white of a woman rising.’ (30) Despite the physical impossibility of the progressive tense of ‘rising’ in a description of a photograph, McGahern dismisses this practicality and implies movement on the ‘torn’ page. The introduction of a potential romance is later quashed within the ice-cold frame of *The Dark*, again as the boy waits for the object of his desire: ‘Evenings after school you hung about the shops waiting for Mary Moran to pass down from the convent, let her cycle out the road a little ahead and pedal furiously to catch her round Clark’s.’ (57) In this case the boy deliberately ‘waits’; he is not waiting for an event in Chapter 10, but waiting for his opportunity, an opportunity in which he will take action. This is appropriate at this point in the novel, when the boy is no longer under the control of Mahoney to any great extent and he has more autonomy in his life.

In the opening pages of Chapter 7, there is over a page of description before it develops into a dream-like fantasy of a prisoner approaching execution. Here, sinners ‘wait’ for absolution. The ‘Waiting’ is emphasised both literally in the text and in the semantics of this opening construct: ‘Around the confession boxes the queues waited’, which is shortly after followed by ‘(a)ll waited for forgiveness’. (39) This is described as a ‘listless performance of habit and duty or torturing and turning over their sins and lives’. (39) The boy wonders: ‘Was the flow of time towards the hour of his execution different for the man in the condemned cell in Mountjoy?’ (40) ‘Waiting’ is again referred to literally in the text as the boy references the condemned ‘waiting’ for the famous hangman ‘Pierrepoint’. This is a reference to the famous British hangman Albert Pierrepoint (1905–1992), a practitioner who applied himself to his profession with chilling efficiency.<sup>9</sup> His reference is another ironic element in the existential context. The differences between being executed and religious confessing are suitably subdued, while the similarities are amplified: ‘Here you’d only to move nearer in the queue and when it got to your turn draw the heavy curtain aside, no scream at the sight of the scaffold, and kneel in the darkness and wait.’ (41)

While the boy was dominated by his father at the beginning of the novel, his father becomes more and more pitiful as the book progresses and the boy more independent, which is a regulating factor on the ‘Waiting’ dynamic. At the end of Chapter 7, Mahoney is impatient as the boy does his penance and he tells his son he will wait outside for him, adding “‘You can’t be long more.’” (43). The boy’s transcension beyond his father is semantically crystallised by the boy becoming the ‘awaited’ but this is also found in McGahern’s linguistic interplay. This

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Albert Pierrepoint’, *The Telegraph*, July 13, 1992.

is notably emphasised by the triple-pronged effect on page 43: “‘I’ll wait for you out at the gate’”, ‘he was waiting at the gate in the cold’, ‘(y)our father was waiting for you outside at the gate’. And in the next page, the first line of Chapter 8 reads: ‘He was waiting at the gate.’ (44)

The novel rests on the characters’ ability to wait, to exist and not act. Reminiscent of a Joycean paralysis, characters seem unable to change their situation and must wait passively for events to unfold.<sup>10</sup> That is perhaps why many of the scenes are written in that bane of grammatical programmes, the passive tense. The boy, Mahoney and the world drift powerlessly forward in *The Dark*. Objects are focalised as being positioned, usually by an identified entity. For example, consider this passage from Chapter 4 as the Mahoneys wait for the arrival of Father Gerald:

The front room was dusted and swept, the calico covers removed from the armchairs. A fire burned in the grate from early morning. A hen was killed and cooked for cold chicken, the set of wedding china unrolled out of the protective sheets in the bottom of the press. Though even in the lamplight and the friendly hissing of logs on the fire, the cloth bleached in the frost white as snow on the table, the room remained lifeless as any other good example. (24)

The only active clauses here relate to the fire which burns, the logs which ‘hiss’ and the room which remains ‘lifeless’. Through these micro-sentences, the argument of the novel is found. Therefore, through close itemisation of sentences and words and the semantic placement of clauses and micro-episodes, ‘Waiting’ is implied. In his chapter ‘The Quest of Narrative’, Todorov writes:

The organisation of the narrative is therefore produced on the level of the interpretation and not on that of the events-to-be interpreted. The combinations of these events are sometimes singular, incoherent, but this does not mean that the narrative lacks organisation; simply this organisation is situated on the level of ideas, not on that of events. (130)

He goes on to call this an opposition between phenomenal causality and ideological causality. It is not difficult to then apply this theory to the work of John McGahern. The waiting for the

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<sup>10</sup> See amplification of Joycean paralysis in Douglas Kanter, ‘Joyce, Irish Paralysis, and Cultural Nationalist Anticlericalism’, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 41.3 (Spring, 2004) pp.381–396.



beating, the waiting for the father, the girl in the photograph and Mary Moran, the confessional, the boy becoming the 'awaited' are instances of both ideological and phenomenal causality in Todorov's terms. They both communicate this sense of 'Waiting boy', 'Waiting man', 'Waiting world', while also propelling the boy's departure from childhood and through adolescence in the context of the rural, dogmatic background where he lives. Indeed, in Todorov's analysis of *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, he discusses the 'ordinary discourse' which separates material and poetic logic:

For us, the combat must occur either in the material world or else in the world of ideas; it is earthly or celestial, but not both at once. [...] To maintain the contrary is to infringe upon one of the fundamental laws of our logic, which is the law of the excluded middle. X and its contrary cannot be true at the same time, says the logic of ordinary discourse. (128–129)

Yet Todorov navigates his source material and concludes that, within *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, '(e)very event has a literal meaning *and* an allegorical meaning'. (129) This can also be established in the phenomenal and ideological causality of 'Waiting' uncovered in the micro-text of *The Dark*. Both strategies of discourse are realisable within the same 'events' which McGahern presents. Unlike the Beckettian infinite waiting, the torture comes to an end in McGahern, through the manifestation of 'Arrival'. However, the result is never satisfactory. These 'Arrivals' can be further divided into micro-episodes, semantic-arrivals and macro-arrivals in the wider context of the novel. These aspects represent the subtlety of McGahern's textual devices in *The Dark*: the narrativization of death.

As early as the Chapter 1 humiliation, the arrival of the belt on the armchair denies the boy of even a proper beating for the invasive humiliation he has been subjected to. While van der Ziel quantifies this episode as more invasive in its anticipation than its execution, it is also the case that worse than being stripped in front of his sisters, he is not even deemed worthy of the 'Arrival' of the belt on his flesh. What arrives instead is the sickening 'arrival' noise of the belt connecting with the armchair. Ultimately the humiliation of Chapter 1 in fact implies that as a mere 'boy', young Mahoney is not man enough to receive the belt. This dynamic of the boy not being old enough to receive 'real' punishment is echoed later when during a furious row, Mahoney declares "“You'd more than a year's luck on your side that you didn't hit”". (37) Instead of violence, Mahoney underlines the boy's physical inferiority. Neither the belt nor Mahoney's fists 'Arrive', not as a symbolic gesture of mercy, but because the boy is not

worth the punishment. When Mary Moran finally does ‘arrive’ in Chapter 10, the boy is unable to progress their exchange any further than superficiality and he resumes masturbation as his only outlet. The ‘Arrival’ of Mary Moran is worse than her never appearing. A more semantic ‘Arrival’ occurs later in Chapter 12. In this case, the arrival is not pronounced but can be found within the texture of the narratological construct McGahern presents the reader. Late at night, the boy lies in bed in the parochial house, where he has gone to stay as he prepares to join the priesthood. In a reprise of Chapter 3, the boy hears Father Gerald approach. In textual terms then, the boy’s ‘Waiting’ is this time unconscious. He is not waiting for the priest like he was in Chapter 3, but instead witnesses his ‘Arrival’. He lies in the bed, listening to ‘real noises’, but unlike Chapter 3, he is not aware that they signify another ordeal of invasive behaviour, which in this case emerges as a series of inappropriately intimate questions. (70) This time, rather than ‘Waiting’ as in Chapter 3, ‘Arrival’ is manifested, which results in a more psychological episode of bullying, one that is fitting in the context of the overall novel’s progression.

In Chapter 17, the boy has abandoned the priesthood dream. When he arrives home with Joan, ‘(t)here was that momentary silence of surprise when they entered the kitchen by the back way and without knocking, opening slow the doors for warning’. (106) Surprises are silent and doors opened slowly to warn those who are waiting. Even the ‘surprise arrival’ must not be a real ‘surprise’. The children are arranged by McGahern to ‘arrive’ by the back way. ‘Actual Arrival’ then is a thing to be feared, as seen by the ‘Arrival’ of the priest in the boy’s bedroom in Chapter 12, the ‘Arrival’ of Mary Moran and when the children tentatively ‘Arrive’ home.

This emptiness of ‘Arrival’ is further echoed in Chapter 25 when the ‘exam results arrived the first week in August’. (151) The exam results are terrific, the boy achieves “‘The scholarship, all honours, everything”” (151), but again this ‘Arrival’ does not work out as expected, as soon it is said: ‘He [The boy] was playing a part in Mahoney’s joy, he was celebrating Mahoney’s joy and not his own.’ (153) The ‘Arrival’ of the successful results are tempered by Mahoney’s insistence on contaminating the boy’s glory with his need for attention. While the boy has achieved virtual perfection, the father turns the ‘Arrival’ of the exam results into the ‘Arrival’ of an opportunity to improve his standing, which is successful as indicated by the managers’ comment when Mahoney buys a suit for his ‘genius’ of a son: “‘You deserve great credit for the way you brought those children up.”” (153) The ‘Arrival’ here for young Mahoney is catastrophically disappointing.

The disappointment of ‘Arrival’ is again textually implied when Mahoney arrives at the boarding house in Chapter 30, near the conclusion of the novel: ‘Mahoney came the next morning, full of a sense of drama. There was an important decision to be made. He’d play in it to the last.’ (183) As with the results of the Leaving Cert, Mahoney will make the son’s life relevant centrally to his. He works to become more important than his son. And yet despite Mahoney arriving, taking a part in the boy’s decision, questioning restaurant customers and even arranging a meeting for the boy with the Dean, his ‘Arrival’ is, like other arrivals in the novel, ultimately a disappointment. During the meeting with the Dean, the boy realises he is being forced to make the decision to leave university himself:

“You’re afraid of failing?”

“I am, father.”

“You’d not have to worry about that in the E.S.B.,” the priest looked you straight in the face and you saw what he was doing and hated him for it. The Dean was forcing you to decide for yourself. (187)

The Dean and Mahoney ‘Wait’ for the boy to ‘Arrive’ at a decision; to choose either university or the clerkship in the E.S.B. The lifetime of passivity manifested textually in the boy’s years throughout the novel are discovered to be poor training for this moment. The boy ‘Arrives’ on the world stage as an adult, signified by his need to make the decision himself. But the victory that might be satisfactory in a *Bildungsroman* model is significantly tempered by the understated position of an E.S.B clerkship as the boy’s only reward for superb Leaving Cert results and winning the scholarship.

Indeed, the use of ‘Arrival’ by McGahern in *The Dark* is a form of death in the novel. The treatment of death in narrative is excellently illuminated by Linda and Michael Hutcheon in their discussion of death and opera. They write:

We need to confer significance on experience (including that of dying) and narratives offer what [Peter Brooks] calls “imaginative events of closure” which accomplish this in ways we can never manage in our own lives.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Linda Hutcheon & Michael Hutcheon, ‘Narrativizing the End: Death and Opera’, in Eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005) (Paperback 2008), pp.441–450, p.447.

In effect, the arrival of the belt on the armchair, Mary Moran, Father Gerald, the boy and Joan in the house, the exam result and the flamboyant appearance of Mahoney in Chapter 30 are all semantic versions of the best the writer can do at 'live' representations of 'death'. Nobody can report the experience of death. But as McGahern frames it in this existential swamp of a novel, through events of micro-text, semantic and macro-text significance, he successfully narrativises it, as an event, many events in effect, deflated and non-glorious, but absolutely certain nevertheless.

This sense of 'Arrival' also plays on a narrative logic. As Todorov explains in 'The Quest of Narrative', narrative logic implies, ideally, a temporality we might call the "Perpetual Present". (132) He explains that discourse is immediate. In this way, the events we are reading about in *The Dark* are happening right now as far as we, as readers, are concerned. So, it is an achievement to extract a sense of 'arrival' from this 'present' discourse. He writes:

We speak of the event occurring during the very act of speech; there is perfect parallelism between the series of events one speaks of and the series of the instances of discourse. Discourse is never behind and never ahead of what it evokes. (132)

Todorov adds: 'The characters, too, live in the present alone; the succession of events is governed by a logic proper to it, and is influenced by no external factor.' (132) This is interesting if we apply it to the characters of *The Dark*. The reading experience is immediate, yet the sense of 'Arrival' is still textually animated. One example is the tangibility of Father Gerald's 'Arrival' in Chapter 12, despite its 'flatness', in its practical presentation of a series of sentences. This represents the 'eventlessness' achieved as 'event' by McGahern within the 'Text'.

With the dynamics of 'Waiting' and 'Arrival' throughout the novel, the underlying texture is an implication of 'Patience' and 'Impatience'. This effect is found both in the micro and macro sense of the 'Text'. The micro-textual manipulation is nowhere more communicated than by the playing of the card game 'Patience'. In Chapter 2, Mahoney 'patiently' plays Patience: 'His hands brushed the soft green surface on the table as he gathered the cards for the flick-flick of the patient dealing again.' (16) This raises an effect common in *The Dark*: the dislocation of limbs from their hosts, suggesting the 'inhuman' existential patience required of young Mahoney during the novel. Arms, legs and even voices become 'demi-characters' in their own right, for example: 'Feet on the cement', (17) 'Her arms stretch above her heads', (30) '[B]odies eased their position', 'Feet came in', (39) 'The voice shook

but tried laughably not to betray its obvious care'. (151) At the card table, this distancing technique is somewhat commuted as 'his hands brushed' with 'he [Mahoney] gathered the cards', which McGahern signals as significant by an onomatopoeic sound effect of 'flick-flick'. This is followed by the comment, collectively from the children of 'Let him play alone'. (16) Instead of limbs dislocated from their hosts, in this scene, the children are dislocated from their 'host' father. The 'patient' method of isolation is indeed the children's only weapon against Mahoney's tyrannical reign and is further textured by the card game's alternative name 'Solitaire'. It is also referenced in relation to the children's distancing in Chapter 6, where Mahoney 'had to play patience along all the time'. (34) Later, the patient card game is again juxtaposed with tension of father and children:

The others stood as sentinels about or went outside. Joan was gone, a breath of death in the air, Mahoney was playing, nothing in the silence but his lonely playing, the shuffling of the deck, swish of the sharp boxing together, as he dealt them out on the board those worn cards of patience flicking. (50)

As this passage progresses, Mahoney moves from 'Patience' in this initial passage, to 'Impatience': 'He gathers them all violently into a heap to begin the journey over again to the same dead end or to reach what he'd been playing for, all the cards magically leaping to their ordered places, once in every four or five hundred times—long lighthouse patience.' (50) While the card game is clearly linked to the children's method of isolating their father, in that he is forced to play a sole game, it can also be easily suggestive of the growing existential anguish throughout the novel signified by the continuous sense of 'Waiting' and 'Arrival'. Beginning 'the journey over again to the same dead end' speaks of a 'Patient/Impatient' crisis of unknowability in the future. There is also a sense of the impossible dream of immortality, but the onward hope that this can somehow be achieved in mortality, underlined by the glory of arranging the cards perfectly once in 'every four or five hundred times'. This is suggestive of the briefest moments of ecstasy within the torturous life of 'Waiting'.

In the macro-structure of the novel, the simple deadness of this 'eventless' passage of card playing is an 'event' of significant narrative effectiveness in its position in the book, fifty pages in, and in the narrative, where the boy prepares to leave for Father Gerald. As the boy travels to the parochial house in Chapter 11, he even notes 'The nearer the waiting got to its end the more certain it seemed that it could never end, it must surely last forever, through it was actually ending even now.' (61) Of course, this is contingent with the end of childhood,

the ‘Waiting’ for adulthood, and the progress toward that phase of young Mahoney’s life which is gathering pace at this point in the novel.

This use of the card game and the waiting at the bus stop suggests McGahern’s ability as a visual writer. In Peggy Phelan’s analysis of the celebrated American painter Jackson Pollock’s work being photographed and filmed by Hans Namuth, she goes on to investigate the elements at work between discourse (meaning the language) and event (meaning the episode at hand).<sup>12</sup> Phelan considers the value of photographing an artist at work and notes that ‘(a)rt that resists photography’s flat square frame risks, in a literal sense, not being seen’. (501) For example, this could relate to the folds of a piece of clothing worn by a model which cannot be seen in full within the artist’s canvas. In the same way, life is a flat painting and many of the twists and turns to come cannot be seen in the vision before the viewer, leading to an existential impatience or patience. In McGahern’s text, the visualisation of ‘eventlessness’, a man playing cards at a table, is projected outward as the appalling (and perhaps unnatural, as seen by the dislocation of limbs from hosts) ‘Patience’ of existentialism. In crystallising the crisis of existence, literature ‘beats’ visual art in this sense. A word is worth a thousand pictures, if you will, in that – unlike the flat screen of the painting – the ‘Text’ can develop many aspects of the single image in the same way as, in the use of narrative logic, *The Dark* executed external dynamics outside of the immediacy of literary discourse.

During a lecture given at Brunel University, the experimental novelist Will Self described the later stages of his writing process on a novel as enacting a phenomenon of the text becoming alive.<sup>13</sup> He describes the text ultimately telling the writer what it is, rather than the other way around. It is true that a survey of John McGahern’s papers at NUIG reveal many repeated written and typed drafts of material, often unchanged in any significant way, as though the writer is only making the most subtle of adjustments, like Mahoney’s ‘flick-flick’ of his patient card game, or in the same way as a plate spinner need only nudge the pates to prolong the effect. Indeed, *The Dark*’s use of aspects of ‘Waiting’, ‘Arrival’, ‘Patience/Impatience’ is practically effective in its evocations of the boy, family, parish or world and brings the ‘Text’ to the point of being a ‘Living Thing’ in the way Self discussed. McGahern’s use of

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<sup>12</sup> Peggy Phelan, ‘Shards of a History of Performance Art: Pollock and Namuth Through a Glass, Darkly’, *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, pp.499–514.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Will Self – Isolation, Solitude, Loneliness and the Composition of Long-Form Fiction’ Lecture at Brunel University, *Youtube* [Accessed: 8 April 2016].

narratological structuring and stylistic contamination of the material achieves the existential torment of the novel's atmosphere.

In his analysis of 'Waiting' in McGahern, van der Ziel notes: 'Sometimes waiting can be a cause for boredom, while on many other occasions it is acknowledged to be the cruellest form of torture imaginable, one that is unlike any other in its protracted intensity.' (237) This constant repetition and disappointment communicates the sense of torture that the boy feels as he progresses through his adolescence. The novel in its entirety is indeed 'Waiting': as the book progresses, it illuminates a 'Waiting' for the 'Arrival' of the answer to the boy's endless ponderings. However, the manipulation of 'Waiting' in *The Dark* also determines McGahern's technique as a narrator and stylistician in a fundamentally explicit way. It is through the analysis of these chapters we can establish how this narrative is executed, by focussing purely on the 'Text' itself.

Through the underlying qualities within both the 'macro-text' and the 'micro-text', contingent to elements of 'Waiting' and 'Arrival' and driven by the presence and absence of 'Patience/Impatience', we come to a more accurate measurement of the poetic use of 'Waiting' in *The Dark*. This is an experientialisation of poetics in John McGahern's work. Todorov defines poetics thus as 'not poetry or literature but "poeticity" or "literariness"'. (33) In this way, the 'Text' is analysed as what it actually is, rather than what it might be in a 'Context' reading. While a purely text-based reading may seem ignorant of the human and sociological qualities in the 'Context', in actuality, the 'Text' invigorates the anthropological and cultural dynamics present in the narrative, in magnifying their manipulation by their creator.

As Beckett characterises 'Waiting' on the stage, McGahern does the same on the page. Even the solitary game of Patience becomes a plural exercise, involving the children and the objects around Mahoney, in the same way as McGahern breaks conventions of passive tense, or animation and inanimation within the novel. We can never be empirical about the effect of *Waiting for Godot* on the writers of literature which followed. However, it is clear that like Beckett, McGahern's narrative effect gives 'play' to the act of 'non-play'. The formal textual measurement of *The Dark* unpacks the troupes of McGahern fiction as it comes alive, in the way Self described, even in its ubiquitous sense of deadness.

## **Biography:**

Martin Keaveney recently submitted a PhD at NUIG (Creative Writing and Textual Studies). He previously completed a B.A. in English and Italian and an M.A in English (Writing). He was awarded the *Sparanacht Ui Eithir* for his research in 2016. His debut collection of short stories, *The Rainy Day*, was published by [Penniless Press](#) in 2018. Short fiction has been published in many literary journals in Ireland, UK and US. Screen credits include Ireland's national broadcaster [RTE](#) and international film festivals. His produced screenwriting is represented by [Adler & Associates](#) in the US and listed in the [British Council of Film](#). His writing for the stage achieved selection for Scripts Ireland Playwriting Festival. He works as a creative writing lecturer/consultant. See more at [www.martinkeaveney.com](http://www.martinkeaveney.com)