Death and Dying in the Modern Irish Novel: Studies in Form and Meaning from James Joyce to Anne Enright

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Summary

This dissertation examines how the modern Irish novel negotiates shifting cultural conceptions of death and dying across the twentieth century. Analyzing a cross-section of important novels — James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room*, Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*, John McGahern's *The Barracks* and Anne Enright's *The Gathering* — my study will argue that the Irish novel has long grappled with the meaning of life and death in a world where religious and secular conceptions of the nature of life and death have continually intersected and conflictually coexisted. Though sometimes viewed as a wholly secular form, the novel in the Irish context has struggled to reconcile Catholic views of life and death that stress the importance of a "good death" and the rewards of eternity with secular worldviews that stress the importance of personal fulfillment in this life and that see death as a final and absolute ending. The novel genre may be secular in its general tendency, but it is also a dialogic form that puts antagonistic conceptions of death and dying into contention with each other, and it is the conflict between these colliding conceptions of death that lends modern Irish narrative fiction much of its interest.

The story of death and dying in the Irish novel is not simply one of declining Catholicism and rising secularism. This study shows that while Irish Catholic notions of death and dying were always challenged by alternative secular value systems, these secular value systems have also struggled to find meaningful alternatives to religious notions of death.

Death and Dying in the Modern Irish Novel is part of a wider body of criticism that deal with the meaning and function of death in the modern novel such as Garrett Stewart's *Death Sentences: Style of Dying in British Fiction* and Frederick Hoffman's *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination*. This study makes a distinctive contribution to this

scholarship by focusing on the specific way that death shapes the structure, form and development of the Irish novel and how these novelistic depictions interrogate existing cultural attitudes towards death and dying.

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Introduction

I.

In a now famous interview hosted by Marian Finucane and broadcast on RTÉ radio on Saturday April 12, 2008, Nuala O'Faolain related to the listening public that she was dying of lung cancer and revealed that she had refused chemotherapy. The reason for this was that as soon as she knew she was going to die, "the goodness went from [her] life."[1] The Irish public listened in rapt attention as O'Faolain declared that there was no religious consolation to be had for her because she did not believe in God or an afterlife. This rawly emotional interview was significant, in part, because it publically voiced one woman's private fears and emotions about dying and also because O'Faolain was relating a very harrowing account of a secular life and death to a once famously Catholic nation. Even more importantly, she was giving voice in public to what is commonly a very private or at most familial experience, and the powerful reactions the interview provoked revealed the extent to which modern Irish society generally silences and marginalizes the voices of the dying.[2] Perhaps the most shocking part of the interview was O'Faolain's brutal honesty about her unmitigated despair and the lack of solace she derived from the idea of God or

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[1] Nuala O'Faolain, "The Saturday Interviews." Interviewed by Marian Finucane. RTÉ. *The Irish Independent.* 13 April 2008. Transcript. http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/nuala-o-faolain-interview-i-dont-want-more-time-as-soon-as-i-heard-i-was-goingto-die-the-goodness-went-from-life-26437188.html.

[2] For a classic account of the invisibility of death in modern society see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*. Trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 87-106. For a recent work on death in the modern Irish context, which also comments on O'Faolain's dying interview, see John Waters, *Beyond Consolation: Or How We Became Too Clever for God…And Our Own Good* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 1-47.

from the promise of an afterlife. O'Faolain was not only making her private death public and declaring the wholly secular nature of her encounter with her end, she was also expressing her sense of her death as inconsolable tragedy. In her view, the pleasures, memories and wisdom that she had accumulated over her lifetime would all disappear without a trace at her passing, with nothing whatsoever surviving after. The interview was brutally honest and utterly uncompromising in its sense of the finality of death, and left in its wake many questions about how the Irish people now make sense of death in an increasingly secular world.

After telling Finucane that she couldn't be consoled by mention of God, O'Faolain mentioned a modern Irish song called "Thíos i lár an ghleanna" that she had heard at the Merriman Summer School and suggested that Finucane might play it at the end of the program, particularly for dying people. O'Faolain explained the song and noted: "And the last two lines are two things, asking God up there in the heavens, even though you don't believe in him, to send you back, even though you know it can't happen. Those two things sum up where I am now."[3] It is curious that O'Faolain explains her own lack of faith and refusal to take solace in the idea of God and then goes on to suggest that her host should broadcast as a means to comfort the dying a song about man's request to God to give him new life. Even more significant is the fact that in her description of the song O'Faolain reveals that her own deepest desire is to be given a second chance at life. The beauty of the Irish song that O'Faolain recommended might well justify its inclusion in the program in any case, but the request also suggested that

[3] O'Faolain, "The Saturday Interviews."

even after we have ceased to (fully) believe in the things we inherit from tradition those things can continue to move us and to mold our emotional sense of our most profound experiences.

Despite her stress on her own private experience of life and death, O'Faolain also expressed in the course of her interview a vivid historical sense of the nature of death and dying. Though underlining a terrific sense of the "aloneness" of her own personal encounter with death, she also drew attention to the fact that she was dying a relatively comfortable death, surrounded and helped by her friends and family, and with enough money to support herself and to meliorate the worst features of the process of dying. In that sense, she said, she considered herself fortunate compared to the multitudes who died in Ireland during the Famine or to the millions of people throughout the twentieth century who had been condemned to die in the most atrocious circumstances imaginable. Despite her acknowledgement of this difference, the distinction she made between her own protected affluence and the totally unprotected mass deaths suffered by so many across history did not ease O'Faolain's emotional suffering. The point she seemed to be making was that in modern affluent societies middle-class people can be spared at least some of the more harrowing forms of death visited on so many people throughout history and can thus meet their ends with some degree of personal control and dignity; nevertheless, the unrelieved anguish that she so graphically expressed about her own dying throughout the interview indicated that even the most comfortable death was ultimately a shatteringly awful experience.

Near the end of the interview O'Faolain expressed the hope that she would die a good death and went on to describe her conception of this kind of death as "some kind of fading away, that you lay on your bed and you were really a nice person and everyone came and said goodbye and wept and you wept and you meant it and you weren't in any pain or discomfort and that you didn't choke and didn't die in a mess of diarrhea and you just go weaker […]." This description evoked the traditional deathbed scene associated with the Christian "good death" that required the dying to receive the last rites, to repent of their sins, to mend family relations, and to sort their worldly affairs before passing away peacefully. However, as a secular person, O'Faolain's description did not mention the elements of faith and salvation conventional to traditional ideas of a good death. For a modern secular unbeliever like herself, O'Faolain indicated, what constitutes a good death is the absence of the grosser forms of pain and suffering, the presence of loved ones, and the avoidance of bodily unpleasantness. Her awareness that even this kind of secular "good death" may be almost as fanciful or as hard to realize as the religious kind was highlighted by her stress on the messy physicality of death that might overwhelm even the most compassionate care. Religious or secular conventional versions of what a "good death" might mean persisted in O'Faolain's imagination and colored her sense of her own passing, but they persisted for her largely as a kind of fantasy or after-image, as something rather fictional and awkwardly out of kilter with the actualities of death in twentieth-first century Ireland.

In modern Western societies death most often takes place in private places such as hospital wards or in bedrooms. The dying are not often interviewed on public media and the horrible loneliness of death is typically passed over in a world where mass culture media of all kinds stress the pleasures and promises of youth and place great emphasis on how people might strive to live longer, healthier, happier lives. Contemporary Ireland is no different to the rest of Europe or North America in this respect. The only public part of most contemporary deaths is the funeral ceremony, but such ceremonies rarely deal with the process of dying itself; instead, funerals offer polite retrospectives of how the life of the deceased person was lived or they try to express solidarity with the grief of the mourners. The most unique aspect of O'Faolain's interview was that a discussion of dying itself became a media event, her words of despair making the front page of the *Sunday Independent* the following day. Here, then, was a shift from private dying to dying in public and from a focus on the recollection of the dead to the process of dying. Even more striking was the contrast between the interview — conducted as an act of friendship between two women with its devastating sense of personal desolation in the face of death — and the traditional Catholic funerary service, always officiated by a clergyman and whose primary purpose is to offer consolation to the living and to affirm the existence of life after death.

Nuala O'Faolain's dying interview stands as one of the most important moments in contemporary Irish cultural history in relation to death and dying not only because of the vividness with which it summed up the state of the human condition at a distinct moment in time, but also because of the way that it opened

out discussions of death to include the conventionally unmentionable aspects of the process such as gross physical suffering and the possibility of ending life without hope or meaning.[4] Lacking the quality of celebration or hopeful anticipation of an afterlife that characterizes traditional Irish wakes and Christian death rituals, O'Faolain laid bare the new challenges of dying at the heart of modern secular Irish society. In the absence of the communal belief systems provided by religious or by ancient myths, modern men and women have to rely on their own private emotional and intellectual resources to come to terms with death or to understand the meaning of their lives in the harsh glare of death. This is a modern Western condition that is not unique to Ireland, but Ireland nevertheless makes a particularly interesting study as Irish attitudes towards death and dying are undoubtedly shaped by a specific Irish history and cultural and literary experience. Given the importance of Christianity to Ireland generally, and of Roman Catholicism in particular as the majority faith, Catholicism has been a crucial part of the history of death in Ireland for many centuries. O'Faolain's interview revealed a sense that the Catholic Church's monopoly in Ireland over the rituals of dying and burial might be receding, but it also highlighted the challenges of dying if one lived without the sureties of religious hope. By articulating her despair, O'Faolain forced listeners to confront radically antagonistic conceptions of death and to attempt to reconcile the Catholic promise

[4] Waters, 1. Waters views this moment as a summing up of "the condition of human existence at a frozen moment in Irish life." The word "frozen" here implies stasis when in fact the interview reveals a moment of change that challenged public perceptions of dying and opened the discussions surrounding death.

of heaven with a liberal humanist emphasis on human life and personal fulfillment. This moment marked a significant watershed in Irish culture as it conveyed an unadorned and complex understanding of death and dying that did not simply construe the end of life as either a punishment or a reward but rather as a final end that could neither be escaped nor transcended.

This study begins with O'Faolain's dying interview because her account of her confrontation with death raised many difficult questions about cultural conceptions of death and dying in contemporary Irish society. While O'Faolain's public voicing of these concerns constituted a visceral moment in Irish culture that signaled a new willingness to openly address conflicting and changing conceptions of death, the issues she raised in that interview were nevertheless ones that Irish writers had absorbed into their works for a considerable time. Many of the difficult questions of how the individual can make sense of death as the communal rituals and religious narratives inherited from Irish history seemed to lose some or much of their former power had been raised and wrestled with in major Irish novels throughout the twentieth century. The five novels that inform this dissertation — James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room*, Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*, John McGahern's *The Barracks* and Anne Enright's *The Gathering* — have been chosen as the centerpieces of my study because of the way that death informs and structures their narratives. We often think of the novel as a form that deals with the pleasures and tribulations of life, with the challenges of coming-of-age, with the excitements or frustrations of courtship and marriage, with the triumphs and failures of family life, the ups and

downs of careers or social ambitions. But we tend to forget how much the novel as a form also deals with death and dying, with the fact that all lives are inevitably lived in the shadow of death, whether this be the death of intimate others or of one's own passing away.

The modern Irish novel may not be unique in this respect, but death and dying certainly pervade the form in an obvious way. *Ulysses*, the most famous twentieth-century Irish novel, opens with a young, mourning-suited Stephen Dedalus grieving the recent death of his cancer-afflicted mother and tormented by the fact that in order to assert his own secular identity he has had to aggravate his mother's physical suffering with a further anguish about her son's loss of faith. Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* is generally considered to be one of the most accomplished realist novels to emerge in twentieth-century Ireland. Here too the experience of death is paramount and governs the narrative shape of the work from the outset to the closing pages. In *The Ante-Room* Teresa Mulqueen is dying of cancer, and as her adult children gather on the Eve of All Saints to prepare for her death they must wrestle not only with their mother's passing but with the conflicts arising from their own inabilities to reconcile earthly passions with the demands of their inherited and deeply ingrained religious feelings. Death inhabits the very title of Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*, a grimly comic novel which savagely parodies all ideas of a "good death" and which explores how the desire to manage death by writing about it exposes the futility of all narrative endeavors to assert control over existence while also acknowledging the human necessity for narrative as a way of easing the fear of death.

John McGahern, considered by many to be the finest Irish novelist of the later twentieth century, returned obsessively across his career to the experience of the death of a mother, a preoccupation that had also motivated his very first novel, *The Barracks*. *The Barracks*, which tells story of Elizabeth Reegan, a lonely woman dying of cancer and outwardly conforming to Catholic rituals of dying that she can only barely participate in, has evident parallels with *Ulysses* or *The Ante-Room*. But McGahern's narration of the experience of dying from the perspective of a dying woman, rather than from that of the children who will outlive her, is also a new departure in Irish fiction. Here, the mother figure is not a representative of a dying generation; she is an individual meeting death as best she can and with little assistance from her family or community. Anne Enright represents a contemporary Irish novelist of distinction, one whose novels have engaged with the secular world of modern late capitalist Ireland, and in this sense there are obvious differences between the Ireland of her novels and that of the poorer rural farming worlds depicted by McGahern and by so many other Irish writers of a previous generation. But in *The Gathering* Enright too constructs an entire novel about how to come to terms with death in an era when the old rites and rituals of death have lost their power but in which no meaningful alternatives have come together to take their place. Enright's novelistic style is, as might be expected, quite different to that of her predecessors, but the continuity of concern between *The Gathering* and the earlier novels just mentioned is all the more remarkable for that. Spanning the best part of a century, we find in all of these works an abiding preoccupation with the idea that there can be no meaningful

engagement with the business of modern living without a corresponding engagement with the significance of death in modern times.

II.

Before discussing the complexities of the relationship between the novel as a form and the experience of death and dying in Ireland, it will be useful to consider the twentieth-century Irish developments in this area in a longer historical perspective. From the nineteenth century onwards, the culture surrounding death and dying in Ireland has been distinguished not simply by the influence of the Catholic Church, but by the incorporation of pagan customs into Catholic religious practice. As Tom Inglis has observed, what separates Ireland from other Western societies is not strictly the inclusion of these practices, but the "variety and frequency with which pagan practices are enacted as part of Catholic religious behavior."[5] Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the phenomenon of the Irish wake, which was both a site of opposition to Catholic control as well as a place where pagan and Catholic beliefs mingled and co-existed. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Gearóid Ó Crualaoich argues, the traditional Irish "merry wake" along with pilgrimages and pattern-festivities, were not simply "marginalized vestiges of archaic Irish culture" but were, rather, "alternative to and co-existent with orthodox Christian values,

[5] Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1987), 21.

beliefs, and ritual."[6] This view of the wake as an alternative to Christian values, as well as a place where these conflicting worldviews come into contact, makes the wake a particularly important trope in Irish literature and culture as a means of understanding the ways that Catholic and pagan beliefs and rituals surrounding death influenced larger cultural conceptions of death and dying.[7]

According to Ó Crualaoich, the traditional or "merry" wake and funeral "together constituted a central institution of popular Irish rural culture which had both great symbolic and behavioral significance in people's lives. The institution articulated for those involved … their collective response to their life experience."[8] The social significance of the traditional Irish wake and the wild behavior, sexually-explicit games, dancing, singing and keening for the dead that accompanied it, posed a threat to the authority of the Catholic Church, which disapproved of such behavior. As early as 1641 the Synod of Armagh objected to mortuary rituals that involved obscene songs and suggestive games, a complaint that was still repeated centuries later in the Maynooth Synod of 1927.[9] Regardless of the Church's objections, the wake tradition obviously enjoyed a continued

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[6] Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, "The 'Merry Wake'," *Irish Popular Culture, 1650-1850*, eds. James S. Donnelly Jr. and Kerby A. Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 173.

[7] The wake as a drunken riotous affair features in a great deal of Irish fiction and song. The Irish-American folksong *Finnegans Wake* tells the tale of a fight that breaks out at a funeral, causing whiskey to be spilled on the corpse who revives and joins the party. The Celtic punk band, The Pogues, pay tribute to the wake in their song, "The Body an American," and their rowdy concerts themselves have, particularly in recent years, been described as Irish wakes. Nineteenth-century Irish fiction such as Maria Edgeworth's *Castlerackrent* features a fake wake. Sygne's *Shadow of the Glen* also features a wake hoax and his more famous play *Playboy of the Western World* is bookended by off-stage wakes.

[8] Ó Crualaoich, 199.

[9] Ibid., 174.

popularity in Irish culture because it eased the transition between life and death, and provided the living with a way of expressing their sorrow as well as reminding them of their own vitality. This kind of communal response to death, as Ó Crualaoich argues, served the dual function of "mourning a transition and also resolving and removing social tension."[10]

The Catholic Church could not entirely condemn or forbid the wake because it served an important social purpose. Instead, the Church had no option but to assimilate the custom and to combine some of the old pagan traditions with its own religious rituals for attending the dead. During the Devotion Revolution (1850-1875) the Catholic Church attempted to shift religious practice from the home to the church. Accordingly, the First Synod of Maynooth in 1875 required parish priests to put an end to unchristian wakes. Though it was not formally required that all funeral ceremonies had to take place in the church rather than in the home until the new Code of Canon Law in 1971, there was a considerable effort to transform the "merry wake" into a somber mourning ritual. As Patrick Corish has noted, even though the traditional wake persisted into the twentieth century, particularly in rural counties, the elements of clerical satire and paganism had essentially been removed from its practice by then. [11]

The Catholic attempts to control attitudes towards death did not just pertain to the wake itself but also to many of the rituals involving funerals and burial. At the beginning of the twentieth century Roman Catholic Canon laws

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[10] Ibid., 199.
[11] Patrick Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience: A Historical Survey* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), 212-213.

regarding funeral rites and burials for suicide victims, unbaptized children and others who died outside of the Church, had an undeniable and harshly unforgiving influence on larger cultural attitudes to death.[12] In Ireland up until the nineteen-fifties and sixties suicide victims were buried in *kileens* or *kyles*, the term used for disused burial grounds employed for the burial of unbaptized children, Jews, peddlers and paupers.[13] Suicide itself was regarded not only as evidence of the sin of despair but also remained a criminal offense to state law until the Criminal Law (Suicide) Act of 1993.[14] Yet, for all its authority, the Catholic Church could never completely control the attitudes of the people towards death as is evidenced by the persistence of the wake as well as the widespread public sympathy for political deaths such as those caused by the Hunger Strikes even though some clergy had termed these deaths voluntary and therefore irreligious suicides. As will become apparent in the later chapters of this study, Irish attitudes towards death during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were informed by a mix of Catholic rituals and restrictions as well as by folk superstitions. Communal and folk practices such as the wake and customs surrounding the dead — the opening of windows at the time of death, covering all the mirrors in the house, stopping the

[12] *The 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law in English Translation* (New York: P.J. Kennedy and Sons, 1919), 412-429. Canon 1239 forbade the ecclesiastical burial of those who died without baptism, with the exception of Catechumens. Canon 1240 denied burial rites to those "who killed themselves by deliberate counsel" as well as those "who order that their body be handed over for cremation and other public and manifest sinners."

[13] Caroline Smyth, Malcolm MacLachlan and Anthony Clare, eds. *Cultivating Suicide?: Destruction of Self in a Changing Ireland* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, Ltd., 2003), 19-20.

[14] Ibid., 16,17,19.

clocks and sitting up all night with the corpse — persisted well into the twentieth century and some continue today.[15]

Even though the Catholic Church's control over death was probably at its height in Ireland in the decades after independence, its power began to decrease as Ireland became more modern and secular. There were many positive aspects to these wider shifts**.** In an attempt to keep pace with the changing attitudes to such matters in wider society, the Catholic Church has, for example, adopted a more forgiving attitude in the later twentieth century towards suicide, cremation and the funeral rights for unbaptized infants.[16] Though these changes were generally welcomed by the Irish public and viewed as beneficial, the wider cultural shifts involved also brought some negative consequences as well. As the Catholic Church liberalized its attitudes towards death, the country also became more affluent and consumerist, and the focus in mass culture and mass media on temporal experience, consumer satisfactions and on a life lived to the full diminished the earlier importance attached to death in Christian societies. Additionally, the greater anonymity of modern urban life and the expansion of state institutions to cover areas such as last illness and dying diminished the communal experience of death and increased the privatization of the process.

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[15]See Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, "The 'Merry Wake'," *Irish Popular Culture, 1650-1850,* James S. Donnelly, Jr. and Kerby A. Miller, eds. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 173-201.

[16] See *The 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law*, canons 1239, 1240 and 1241 and *Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition*, translation prepared under the auspices of the Canon Law Society of America (Washington: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), canons, 1176, 1183, and 1184.

Major historians of death such as Philippe Ariès have suggested that death in modern culture has become removed from daily life, hidden and sealed away in hospital rooms rather than being discussed publically as a natural part of human life. Ariès argues: “The dying man’s bedroom has passed from the home to the hospital […] The hospital is the only place where death is sure of escaping a visibility — or what remains of it — that is hereafter regarded as unsuitable and morbid.”[17] It follows that because death is not as visible in society it becomes a forbidden or unmentionable topic and, as Geoffrey Gorer argues, now takes the place of sex as a tabooed topic.[18] The reason that death becomes forbidden or invisible according to Ariès is partly attributable to a more widespread shift away from a communal lifestyle after the First World War. The privatization and denial of death, Ariès contends, results in death becoming artificial, arranged and controlled by bureaucrats.[19] Throughout the twentieth century modern technologies and medical advancements made it possible to live longer but also made it more difficult for modern individuals to come to terms with death. One of the most profound effects of this shift was that death became culturally invisible and unreal. Furthermore, as religious or mythic narratives declined, modern societies had few alternative ways of making sense of death, resulting in an increased fear of the end of life as Western cultures became focused instead on life and how to live longer.

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[17] Ariès, 571.
[18] Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1965).
[19] Ibid., 585-588.

In their co-authored book, *The Good Funeral, Death, Grief and the Community of Care*, Thomas Long, an American Presbyterian minister, and Thomas Lynch, an Irish-American funeral director and poet, discuss the current state of the funeral in the contemporary United States and argue that modern funeral ceremonies in the twenty-first century have grown increasingly sanitized, distancing the mourners from the reality of death. The increase in cremations, they argue, suggests a reluctance on the part of the mourner to confront the corpse except in a manner that disguises the reality of death. This refusal to deal with the bodies of the dead and the concomitant denial of the fact of death as such results in an inability to cope with the grief and loss that surrounds death.[20] It is this problem that inspired Long and Lynch to author *The Good Funeral*, which attempts to serve as a kind of alternative to the *ars moriendi* and which, instead of offering instructions for the dying, provides a set of guidelines for the living on how to handle death and cope with loss. Long and Lynch make it clear that their intention is to remind funeral directors and pastors of their jobs and responsibilities to the deceased and to the bereaved family. However, this book serves the much larger purpose of providing a formula for the creation of a "good funeral" that in many ways functions as a substitution for the earlier notion of a "good death."

Unlike death, an event that is uncontrollable and can occur unexpectedly, the funeral is something that can be controlled and regulated, thus serving to ease the pain of loss by offering the bereaved the illusion of control over death. The

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[20] Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief and the Community of Care* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 59-60.

modern funeral, Long and Lynch argue, has become devalued not only because of the commercialization of the funeral business but also because the corpse is often not present at the ceremony. Without the structures or rituals that inform the traditional funeral, the modern secular "memorial service" or "celebration of life" becomes, in Long's words, "a potpourri of made-up pageantries and sentimental gestures combined with a few leftover religious rites that have broken loose from their moorings and floated downstream."[21] According to Long and Lynch, there are several elements required for a "good funeral" whose purpose is, Lynch argues, "to get the dead and the living where they need to be."[22] These elements are: the presence of the corpse, the attendance of survivors who cared about the deceased, some way of registering the change of status between living and dead and the disposition of the dead body. One important way of registering the change in status between living and dead is through narrative. Narrative serves as a way of mediating between the corpse and the mourners by describing the way that that death has altered reality and constitutes an essential response to mortality.[23] This need for narrative often takes religious expression but need not be so. Long claims that the act of participating in the funeral procession itself — transporting the dead to the grave — is to "enact a ritual story with a beginning, middle and an end."[24] The narrative shape of the funeral acts as a way of giving a human life coherence and wholeness, restoring the fracturing effects of death. Narrative, then, serves an important role in mediating between the individual and the

[21] Ibid., 197.
[22] Ibid, 189.
[23] Ibid., 80.
[24] Ibid., 212.

communal and provides grieving individuals with a way of coping with death and loss. Long and Lynch argue that communal rituals such as the funeral procession have lost some of their significance in modern times and that a restoration of these basic human rituals is necessary in order to cope with death and grief.

Most funeral rituals in Ireland still feature the presence of the corpse and a procession in which the living transport the dead to the grave. Nevertheless, Lynch and Long's model provides a valuable link between the sociological changes in death practices and the way that these alterations are processed in novelistic narrative. This notion of the funeral as a narrative that tells the story of a person's movement from birth to death becomes particularly important in the last and most recent novel in this study, *The Gathering*, whose structure is informed by Veronica's journey to retrieve her brother's body from England and to bring it back to Ireland.

As secular humanist conceptions of death have vied with Catholic ones in recent decades, funeral rituals in Ireland became more hybrid or eclectic. Very few deaths, whether of believers or non-believers, are conducted outside of the Christian churches altogether. Thus, most people, even non-believers or those who do not attend religious ceremonies or sacraments, still have church funeral services and are buried in consecrated graveyards. But the Catholic rituals of death also slowly ceded ground to new practices. It became more common for families to personalize the religious rituals by incorporating aspects of the deceased person's life into the ceremonies. Some bereaved families chose to deliver their own eulogies where once the priest was the only person allowed to

perform this task. Others insist on the incorporation of secular songs into the service where once religious hymns dominated. Additionally, personal items that held special meaning for the deceased were more commonly integrated into the memorial service. For some mourners, this made the funeral service more "personal" and meaningful; for others, including disapproving clergy, it represented an unwelcome return of "pre-Christian" or "pagan" elements into the sacred rituals of the Church.

As we assess the changes in Irish society and culture with regard to death and dying of the kind I have outlined above, it is important to note that these changes were invariably complex and rarely linear. Thus while it is often assumed both in social and cultural criticism that early twentieth-century Ireland was a wholly and homogeneously Catholic society and that Ireland is now in the twenty-first century an almost wholly secular society, this represents a serious simplification of the reality. The assumption that Ireland was once wholly Catholic separates Ireland off from the wider developments in post-Enlightenment Europe and approaches matters as though scientific and secular humanist developments elsewhere had made no impact on the Irish world before the nineteen sixties. However, as even a casual reading of, say, the Irish Revival will show, this was never the case: Irish Catholicism had always to contend with other competing Protestant versions of Christianity and with the various forms of neopaganism espoused by Yeats and other Revivalists as well as with various forms of socialism and republicanism in the political sphere that were sometimes strongly anti-religious in cast. By the same token, even though Irish Catholicism

today may be in steady recession or even in a condition of acute crisis, a great many Irish people still devoutly practice Catholicism and many others who are "lapsed" or "non-practicing" Catholics turn to the church to mediate important moments in their lives, the moments of birth and death especially. Thus, it will be the contention of this thesis that the transition from religious to secular worldviews in Ireland was a radically uneven process, one in which religious and secular systems have consistently but competitively overlapped with each other in complex ways throughout the century.

These developments, in my view, can best be conceptualized by using Raymond Williams's notion of "dominant," "emergent" and "residual" forms of cultural expression. Viewed in Willliams's terms, one can argue that the Roman Catholic worldview was the dominant worldview in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century, but even then that dominance was contested to various degrees by residual forms of pagan belief or practice (as most obviously embodied in the wake customs mentioned above) as well as by emergent forms of secular humanist ideology and atheist conviction. As the century progressed, and as Ireland became more deeply embedded in global capitalism and in new and larger political realities such as the European Economic Community (now European Union), and as the country was exposed to foreign and domestic modes of mass culture by way of cinema, television and other media, religious and secular worldviews entered into much more open and vocal conflict with each other. It is generally held that the Catholic Church fought against these secularizing forces, but it also tried to absorb and accommodate them into its own

worldview or structures of feeling where possible. By the end of the twentieth century the relative force of religious and secular elements in Irish society would appear to be of nearly equal weight, this creating a situation in which neither the secular humanist view nor the Catholic worldview can claim to be wholly dominant even if the secular worldview has in recent decades clearly been gaining steady ground on Catholicism. This awkward co-existence of secular and religious worldviews in the late twentieth century is further complicated by what Williams argues is the capacity of declining or residual elements of a culture to remain active as "an effective element of the present."[25] What this means is that even as a once dominant worldview, such as Catholicism in this instance, begins to recede, it can still exert a critical function by challenging the new norms and values instituted by what has now become the dominant or established culture that has displaced it.[26] Williams's model allows us to check the tendency to assume that every society is becoming or destined to become wholly secular (or wholly religious for that matter), and it reminds us that transitions are always complex non-linear affairs. Most of all, what Williams's model emphasizes is that these apparently whole or solid cultural blocs that we designate as residual, emergent or dominant are porous and permeable and that they are constantly seeping into one another.

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[25] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122.

[26] Ibid., 123. Williams explains: "A residual cultural element is usually at some distance from the effective dominant culture, but some part of it, some version of it — especially if the residue is from some major area of the past — will in most cases have to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in these areas."

III.

The topic of death in the novel has provoked an interesting body of scholarship in recent decades. The most significant of these studies are: Garrett Stewart's *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction*, Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic,* Frederick Hoffman's *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination* and Alan Warren Friedman's *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*.[27] These critical works are focused on Western representations of death in the novel and the way that these portrayals of death and dying reveal something about repressed desires, human anxieties surrounding mortality and the separation between fiction and reality. Inevitably, as Hoffman and Friedman suggest, novelistic portrayals of death are shaped by philosophical, literary, cultural and historical developments. Thus, these studies provide a general framework for understanding death in modern Western culture but the specific historical and cultural context of the Irish novel complicates these models considerably, as we shall see.

The Irish novel is a fascinating medium through which to rethink changing conceptions of death in Irish culture since the form often tries to reconcile or mediate the social structures of feeling that shape how we think about death and dying. To put it another way, death by its very nature poses exceptionally acute

[27] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Alan Warren Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Frederick Hoffman, *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964); and Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

problems for the meaning of existence, and this is equally true for religious or secular societies alike. The novel tries to give structure and meaning to human life and for this reason it must by definition incorporate some attitude toward the meaning of life or death even when these matters are not specifically engaged as its primary subject matter. In the Irish case, matters are complicated by the fact that nineteenth-century Ireland had experienced particularly traumatic encounters with death. The Great Famine, which resulted in the death by starvation or disease of one million people and in the emigration of another million in the decades following, is the starkest example of this traumatic encounter with death. That single episode left a lasting legacy that, according to most cultural historians, continued to affect Irish society well into the twentieth century. [28] The nature of this legacy was most obviously marked in Irish attitudes to the exceptionally high rate of emigration that followed on from the Famine and that lasted into the twentieth century. These departures from individual families and communities were often marked by "American wakes" that constructed emigration as a kind of social death. The fact that such "wakes" survived even after the availability of air-travel and easier return indicates how strongly the wake itself persisted as a mode for negotiating death and departure and how slowly cultural conceptions of death may change.

If the Irish historical experience of death is a very particular one, how does the Irish novel deal with the complexities of this experience? The novel in Ireland

[28] Lawrence Taylor, "Bás In Éirinn: Cultural Constructions of Death in Ireland." *Anthropological Quarterly* 62:4 (October 1989) 183-184. Taylor discusses how for the immigrant burial in Ireland serves as a means of re-incorporation into the culture after the separation "death" that occurred at departure.

is, as in many other cultures, a relatively new literary genre and the form has been shaped therefore by its own engagements with modern Western conceptions of death. In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Peter Brooks has argued forcefully that the emergence of novelistic narrative plot as a way of ordering human experience can be attributed to the process of secularization.[29] Brooks explains that during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment religious plots such as that of the Chosen People, Redemption and the Second Coming began to lose their earlier hold and people therefore needed a new way of making sense of their individuated time-bounded mortal existence.[30] Likewise, in *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt emphasizes the importance of an emergent middle-class worldview for the development of the novel as form. This middle-class worldview, Watt argues, takes the fate of the individual and his or her relationship to a historically-conceived society rather than to the eternity of the next world as its primary focus of interest. [31] Thus, although most British novels were generally respectful of Christianity and might even be strongly Protestant in many of their fundamental assumptions, the novel as a species had a strongly secularizing thrust due to its focus on worldly pursuits and its adherence to the conventions of realism.

Nevertheless, while the novel as form may indeed have contributed to the shaping of a modern secular worldview, the medium is also, as Mikhail Bakhtin

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[29] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 6.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 84.

and others have argued, an intrinsically dialogic form. By this Bakhtin means that the novel is not a pure form — such as the religious sermon, philosophical tract or the sonnet or elegy — but rather a heterogeneous and composite medium comprised of many different types of discourses or idiolects (social, philosophical, legal, moral, religious, secular, and so forth) that mold and mediate the devices of character and plot. In Bakhtin's view, these different discourses are usually not easily reconciled with each other and this opens up the possibility of their mutual contestation of each other's assumptions.[32] From this standpoint, even if the novel as form is, as argued earlier, generally secular in orientation, there is scope within the form nonetheless for at least some contestation of the secular also. Thus, we might conclude that the novel tends to be a largely secular form, but that in strongly religious societies a tension between religious and secular modes of discourse can always be expected to inform the "raw materials" from which the novel constitutes itself. Many scholars have noted, for example, that the secular thrust of the nineteenth-century English or French realist novel does not hold true for the wider spectrum of the novel as a whole. Hence, the rise of the English realist novel runs alongside Gothic and other "romantic" or "evangelical" modes that retain a strong interest in the supernatural. Likewise, the strongly anticlerical grain of the French realist novel coexists alongside a distinguished French Catholic novel tradition.[33] The novel, in short, may in the

[32] See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 276-277, 314.
[33] See Theodore P. Fraser, *The Modern Catholic Novel in Europe* (New York: Twayne, 1994); Malcolm Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul of the French Novel:*

main be a secular form, but in religious societies especially secular ideologies can be expected to have to enter into complex relation with religious ideologies that retain considerable force.

Peter Brooks's argument that novelistic plots compel their reader because the latter are driven by the need to know or understand death is particularly important to this study. According to Brooks, narrative is connected to man's "time-boundedness" and plot is "the internal logic of the discourse on mortality."[34] Brooks further argues that Sigmund Freud's theories of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, as outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, can be mapped onto the psychic functioning of narrative plot itself, which is bound and regulated by these tensions between the life and death instincts. The process of reading compulsively forward through the pages of a novel is, Brooks says, charged by the reader's desire to know the ending, at which point the tensions of the plot will be relieved and the whole narrative that leads to the ending will acquire a meaning by virtue of the retrospective view afforded by the end. In this sense, the process of reading resembles the death drive or the desire to relieve tension by bringing things to an end.

But novels also need to create suspense and to stimulate and to do this they have also to defer the pleasure of meaning. In this sense, they also resemble

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French Catholic and Realist Novels, 1850-1970 (London: Macmillan, 1989); Thomas Woodman, *Faithful Fictions: The Catholic Novel in British Literature* (Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press, 1991). For more on the Irish Catholic novel see Eamon Maher, *Crosscurrents and Confluences: Echoes of Religion in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Dublin: Veritas, 2000) and Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien, eds., *Breaking the Mould: Literary Representations of Irish Catholicism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).

[34] Brooks, 22.

Eros or the life instinct. The novel, as Brooks sees it, plays the life and death instincts against each other; both are fundamental to the pleasures of novelistic narrative but the one cannot sustain itself without the other. These conflicting desires for life and for death are connected by their arrangement into plot, which Brooks views as the organizing line or intention of narrative. In order to better illustrate his points about narrative desire and the death drive, Brooks uses the example of Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* in which the narrator Raphaël de Valentin finds a magic talisman in the form of a rough piece of un-tanned skin which will fulfill his every desire but at the cost of diminishing the length of his life and shrinking the size of the talismanic skin. According to Brooks, the talisman "offers a metaphor not only for life as desire but also of narration, telling as another form of desire."[35] Ultimately, Raphaël's life story is the story of desire whose "lack of satisfaction gives death as the only alternative, but whose satisfaction would also be death."[36] In this sense, *La Peau de chagrin*, in Brooks's reading, is a story of narrative desire itself, which transforms a character's actions and the events of a life into a coherent whole. Thus narratives, Brooks argues, are life-giving in that they arouse and sustain desire but they also reveal the human desire to tell and to implicate the listener in the "thrust of desire that can never quite speak its name."[37] This desire can never fully be realized as it would mean not only the end of the novel but also the death of desire itself. Thus, even as the plots of novels are driven by this desire to know or understand death, they also

[35] Ibid., 53.
[36] Ibid., 58.
[37] Ibid, 61.

possess a contrary urge to delay death and extend life. The end of a novel serves in some way to release these tensions between the life and death instincts but does not fully satisfy the reader's desire for meaning.

Brooks's model provides an intriguing starting point from which to examine the way that death shapes the form and structure of the novel in general and contributes both to the desire of the reader to linger in pleasurable if also frustrated suspense and to get to the end of things in order to discover the ultimate meaning that only knowledge of the end can confer. Nevertheless, for all the attention he pays to death and the need for meaning as propulsions that motivate both the forward-motion of the novelistic plot and the psychology of the reader, Brooks's insistence on the secularity of the novel is such that he actually pays little or no attention to the fact that there are many competing conceptions of death. In other words, Brooks's understanding of the novel as a form is a deeply psychoanalytic one and he thinks of death, therefore, in terms of competing life and death drives or instincts, and his model, like psychoanalysis generally, is largely ahistorical and indifferent to political or cultural difference. Hence, although I have found Brooks tremendously useful for thinking about the novel as form — as well as for reading individual works such as *The Ante-Room* or *Malone Dies* for example — I have not found him particularly helpful for thinking about how the novel negotiates competing religious and secular worldviews or ideas of death. Therefore, one of the goals of this study is to extend Brooks's model beyond what it can tell us about the reading process generally so

as to deal with more directly historical engagements in the Irish novel with rival conceptions of death.

The five Irish novels, ranging from the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922 to the publication of Anne Enright's *The Gathering* in 2007, that form the spine of this dissertation have been selected as representations of the wider engagement with death and dying in the modern Irish novel. I do not mean to suggest by this that these works can stand in for the Irish novel as a whole, but rather that they allow us to think about some of the different ways in which the Irish novel has engaged with ideas of death and dying and to get some sense of how novelistic modes of narrating death have changed over the course of the last century. One might well imagine many other novels that would be equally germane to this topic, but my object in this study is not to trace a comprehensive study of either death and dying in modern Ireland or in the Irish novel for that matter, but rather to examine some moments in which the intersection of these two phenomena might have broader symptomatic cultural interest.

As this study conceives of its subject, the novel is never simply a social document and it certainly cannot be conceived as a transparent window onto social reality. In other words, we cannot simply read novels to discover how people at any particular period in time experienced death and dying in Ireland. Rather, the approach adopted here is one that views the novel as a rather elastic literary form that assimilates residual, emergent and dominant discourses and ideas in a society and that fashions these materials into plots or stories of human interest. But as it assimilates these various forces, the novel cannot help but put

them into mutual dialogue with each other. The form thus allows scope for critique of these forces as well as for discussion of the ways that these matters are forced into particular kinds of "resolutions" or "endings." It may well be the case, as Peter Brooks argues, that readers always read for the end because the end is the only vantage point from which we can gain some sense of transcendent meaning, a meaning that can only elude us whilst we are still at the beginning or in the *media res*. But even so in an age in which secular and religious conceptions of what death or "the end" means vie with each other, the meaning of "the end" is itself inevitably in flux. The novel may offer a more definitive sense of closure than social narratives do, but it is debatable whether this is necessarily what draws readers to novels or what makes novelistic endings seem increasingly arbitrary or provisional. In any case, if the Irish novel does not offer us a simple window onto Irish society, it does, in this conception of things, try to draw the conflicting worldviews or structures of feeling operative within a society into its narrative fold. The ways in which the novel succeeds — or fails — to do this can tell us interesting things about the society more generally.

V.

This discussion of death and dying in the modern Irish novel begins in Chapter One with James Joyce's *Ulysses* not only because of that novel's decisive influence on the twentieth century Irish novel that followed, but also because of the central importance of death to Joyce's most famous work. The deaths encompassed in this work are multiple and various: they include the death of

Gaelic language and culture; the death of Stephen's belief in Catholicism; the death of Bloom's father and his son Rudy and the lingering death of his marriage; perhaps even in a certain way the death of the realist novel as such. If *Ulysses* is viewed in this manner, one might argue that it shares many concerns with the earlier nineteenth-century Irish novel, which was more often preoccupied with the death of Gaelic culture or with the collective deaths of larger communities such as the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy or the impoverished peasantry than with individual death. Nevertheless, though these wider communal concerns are always in the background in *Ulysses*, Joyce's focus is nevertheless quite firmly fixated on the individual experience of death as mediated in particular through the characters of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom. Beginning the novel with Stephen remembering the tormented dying of his mother, Joyce integrates death throughout the narrative, inserting it into the midst of life. Rather than trying to reconcile Catholic and liberal secular worldviews, Joyce sees them as intrinsically linked in terms of their incapacity to make any meaningful sense of death. In the novel, Stephen, a secular "lapsed Catholic" and non-religious Jew, Leopold, may not share the Catholic convictions of middle-class Dublin society generally, but their lack of religious conviction doesn't entirely free them from guilt or represent complete liberation. Rather, the younger and older man are both melancholics and are unable to resolve their mourning for departed or lost loved ones and therefore cannot fully connect with each other. If, for Joyce, there is any resolution to the problem of death in the modern world, then that solution comes in the form of the novel itself whose plot can be rearranged and its elements recomposed to form

new meanings and associations. In the course of *Ulysses*, Catholic rituals of death and dying are mocked and desacralized, but are nevertheless absorbed into the novel itself and their recomposition and reordering provides the text with new life and vitality. It is, *Ulysses* seems to suggest, in the endless possibilities of novelistic narrative that individuals are resurrected and the dead gain new life. The dead are not simply memorialized in Joyce's novel but, rather, work to disturb the narrative order. In this way death works to disrupt stable or fixed meanings and functions as a point of reinvention or rebirth.

The Irish novelists following Joyce do not share his faith in literary narrative to restore or rejuvenate life or to overcome the finitude imposed by death. Chapter Two discusses the complicated relationship between Catholic obligation and human desires in Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room*. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, *The Ante-Room* is steeped in a deeply Catholic world and the socio-religious structures put in place by Catholicism to make sense of death are firmly intact. As the title of *The Ante-Room* suggests, it is a novel that hovers in the waiting chamber between two spaces — life and death — and O'Brien's narrative explores how life and death interpenetrate each other. Set on the three consecutive November holidays that commemorate the dead, the Eve of All Souls, All Soul's Day and All Saint's Day, the novel's structure suggests that the boundaries between these two worlds is particularly porous on Catholic feast days. There is a strained sense throughout the novel that despite the fact that these different worlds of life and death have temporarily converged by means of the observation of the sacred calendar, the Mulqueens cannot inhabit both worlds and must choose

between the two. In other words, in *The Ante-Room* death does not relieve the tensions between religious and secular worldviews but highlights their incompatible and mutually destructive natures. In refusing to make these worldviews cohere, O'Brien forces the characters, and in turn her readers, to assess what is gained and hat is lost when one of these competing ways of being in the world is privileged over the other.

This purgatorial sense of being trapped between life and death finds further and narratively more experimental and macabre elaboration in Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies.* Rather than seeking to transcend death by means of narrative rearrangement and reinvention as Joyce does, or to compel the reader to weigh the merits of secular and spiritual commitments in the manner of O'Brien, Beckett pushes the idea that death defeats every worldly ambition to such an extreme that the novel itself begins to implode and all forms of narrative eventually come to seem mere exercises in futility. As Beckett's Malone attempts to narrate his own demise, he initially finds himself following the religious models laid out for him in genres such as the *ars morendi* as exemplified by the Anglican Jeremy Taylor's *Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying* and the *Order of Christian Funerals.* However, Malone soon finds that he cannot adhere to these protocols because he cannot recall any sins to confess, has no memory of his origins, and fails to fully separate himself from his own fictional recreations. Thus while he tries to take his cues from Catholic or Protestant prescriptions for a good death, Malone ultimately reduces these practices to demented farce. The novel ends with an unfinished sentence, leaving its readers with a sense of dissolution

and loss and mocking their unavailing need for closure and the meaning closure ought to confer. As I read it, *Malone Dies* at once reworks the concerns raised by Joyce and O'Brien about how to reconcile religious conceptions of death with the inherently secular form of the novel while also suggesting that despite the fact that death will always disastrously thwart the human compulsion to find meaning in existence, a human desire for structure and meaning will nevertheless stubbornly if futilely persist. Beckett's use of macabre humor works to highlight the pointlessness of attempting to find meaning and order through novelistic narrative while also suggesting that narrative is the only way of confronting the reality of death and accepting mortality.

Chapter Four on John McGahern's *The Barracks* returns to the Catholic-dominated social reality depicted by Joyce and O'Brien, but also shows evidence of its post-Beckettian status in its denial of transcendence and in its refusal of the consolation provided by Catholic notions of eternity. The dead or dying mother depicted in Joyce, O'Brien and Beckett returns in McGahern's work as a decisive trope in the figure of Elizabeth Reegan, a former nurse and now a housewife in her forties dying of cancer in the rural mid-west of Ireland. Elizabeth's life is strongly tied to her family's welfare and her sense of self is tightly bound up with her position in the local community, yet the prospect of dying separates her from all that surrounds her. Death forces Elizabeth to reevaluate her life and her beliefs and causes her to recall the existentialist philosophies that she had encountered as a young woman living in London during the Second World War. There is a sense that Elizabeth can neither accept her life in wholly existentialist terms nor yet

return to some earlier unthinking faith in God. In *The Barracks* Christianity may help the living to console themselves in the face of death, but it also overwhelms the actuality of death for the dying person and thus serves to negate any really meaningful encounter with death. McGahern's novel is unique in this study in that it is narrated from the perspective of a dying woman and moves from the individual to the communal, indicating the failures of society to accommodate personal suffering. By contrasting an existentialist focus on the individual quest for meaning with Elizabeth's social reality, which is dominated by Catholic rituals and communal concerns, McGahern is suggesting that the individual life is lived socially, and that this reality must be taken into account when attempting to make sense of death. Novelistic narrative has an important role in mediating between the individual and the social world in which that individual's life is lived.

Chapter Five elaborates this conception of death as a force that exposes or reveals things that society would prefer to keep hidden from itself. Anne Enright's *The Gathering* begins with the narrator, Veronica Hegarty, receiving news of her brother Liam's suicide in England. To cope with her loss, Veronica travels to England to recover the body of her brother and to return him to his family in Ireland for burial. As she takes on this task, Veronica tries to write down her family history as a way of making sense of her trauma. In the absence of well-established rituals that bestow meaning on the dead, the act of writing provides Veronica with a way to figuratively experience death in order to help her to re-engage with life after the funeral. Veronica's commitment to writing recalls both Joyce's faith in the endless narrative possibilities of the novel and also recalls

Beckett's Malone as he tries in frustration to order his life through narrative in the face of death's undoing. The Irish wake features prominently in *The Gathering*, but in this instance it is an event transformed from its earlier nineteenth-century or even Joycean manifestations. The characters in *The Gathering* adhere to the rituals of the Catholic wake not because they believe in any religious or pagan cosmology, but out of a sense of obligation to their family and to the dead; it is, as the title suggests, a way of gathering the bereaved and assembling shared memories and grief. Significantly, even in the largely secular Ireland of Enright's novel the wake still serves a social function of passage from this world to the beyond and adhering to its rituals provides Veronica with a structure for her narrative, allowing her to collocate forgotten memories. *The Gathering* depicts an Ireland in which Catholic and liberal humanist worldviews co-exist. Death does not force these views into opposition but rather uncovers shared traumas of the past. Enright's novel succeeds, then, in combining pagan and religious rituals attending death in a way that proves meaningful for its secular protagonists. In the absence of any strong religious or mythic narrative to bind communities together and provide a means of understanding death, it is the process of retrieving and disposing of the dead that supplies a narrative structure that allows the bereaved to process their grief and move on with life.

Despite the prevalence of wakes, death and dying in Irish novels, the topic has as of yet yielded no major critical studies. The Irish novel, this study will argue, has long been wrestling with the meaning of death and dying in a world where religious and secular conceptions of the nature of existence and passing

away have uneasily co-existed and mutually interrogated each other for a very long time. As such, the topic of death in the Irish novel is not only worthy of study but can also contribute to a much deeper understanding of larger cultural shifts. The five novels in this study do not provide answers to the meaning of life or death in modern Ireland, but how they structure and narrate death reveals something of the way that humans conceive of mortality. In order to understand how we live, these novels suggest, we must first come to terms with how we die.

Chapter One

Death and Narrative Regeneration:

James Joyce's *Ulysses*

I.

The central importance of death to Joyce's *Ulysses* tends to be overlooked by readers and critics who focus instead on the novel's famous ending, with Molly Bloom's vitalist affirmation of life summed up in the word "Yes."[1] But one might argue that the plot of *Ulysses* is equally driven by a sense of death and loss, its narrative motivated by a desire for meaning and understanding of death, a concern evidenced from the first chapter's focus on Stephen Dedalus as he broods over the death of his mother. Rather than simply affirming life, Joyce's novel seeks to confirm death's presence in life, thereby emphasizing the circularity of life's natural cycle and also undoing the normative function of novelistic endings. While Joyce's impulse to create *Ulysses* may have been partly motivated by his mother's death and while there are undoubtedly autobiographical links between Joyce's and Stephen's grief over their mothers' deaths, what is of central significance here is the way that death both drives and shapes the narrative, and serves as a motivation for reinventing the form of the Irish novel.[2] Joyce accomplishes this reinvention by employing the narrative structures of Homer's *Odyssey* and parts of the Catholic liturgy in order to highlight the inability of

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[1] James Joyce, *Ulysses,* ed. Hans Walter Gabler (1922; repr., London: The Bodley Head, 1984). 18:644.

[2] See Mary Lowe-Evans, *Catholic Nostalgia in Joyce and Company* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2008) 12-13, 22. Lowe-Evans has argued that Joyce's grief over his mother's death served as an impetus for the writing of *Ulysses*. She cites similarities between May Dedalus's deathbed scene and that of Joyce's mother, described in his letters, as evidence of Joyce's desire to control memory and overcome the finality of death.

these structures to adequately order or contain human life. By inserting death into the midst of life, Joyce hopes to reinvigorate narrative form, bringing the living and the dead into dialogue.

Ulysses is a fitting starting point to this study not only because of its decisive influence on the twentieth-century Irish novel's form but also, more importantly, because of the prominence of death in its narrative. Many deaths shadow this narrative: the death of Charles Stewart Parnell; the death of the mother in the lives of several characters; the death of Leopold Bloom's father and of his son Rudy, not to mention that of Paddy Dignam whose funeral Bloom attends. While this study will focus on the human deaths, the metaphoric death of the Irish language and the death of Stephen's belief in Catholicism also contribute importantly to the novel's sense of loss and to Joyce's attempts to offer literary compensation for these losses.[3] Joyce's preoccupation with death does not begin here, however; it is first evidenced in *Dubliners* in stories such as "The Sisters" and his most famous story "The Dead." Death, in other words, is central from the outset to his conception of art and of narrative form. For Joyce, death represents a primary and irrevocable loss that serves as an impetus for artistic invention and as a driving force for creation and reinvention. In narrative, Joyce sees the possibility of overcoming the notion of death as a final end, and instead he stresses the power

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[3] See Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 140 and 149. Hand contends that the Irish wake and funeral have always been of extreme interest to novelistic audiences, particularly those outside of Ireland. He further asserts that in the nineteenth-century novel the wake and funeral scene were representative of the death of Irish culture and, rather than mourning an individual life, became expressions of cultural death.

of narrative, and novelistic narrative in particular, to provide everlasting life through the arrangement of words and their endless combinations of meanings.

Despite his own agnosticism, Joyce's fictional depictions of death were undoubtedly influenced by his Catholic upbringing, particularly the devotion of his mother, and by the Catholic rites and rituals that dominated Irish society at the end of the nineteenth century. Catholicism, like other religious and mythical narratives, provides humans with a way of making sense of death and of coping with grief, and *Ulysses* strongly features Catholic death rituals. While Joyce's novel is widely thought to reject Catholicism as ideology, the religious elements in the narrative demonstrate Joyce's admiration for the power of Catholic ritual to alleviate anxieties surrounding death and to bind communities together.[4] The narrative also offers clear disapproval of Catholicism's restrictions on the body and division of mortal and immortal time. Part of Joyce's task, then, is to undo these divisions and, through his incorporation of religious ritual into his novel, to interrogate the function of these rituals and divisions in society. As part of that task, Joyce interrogates not only Catholic rituals; through Bloom's free associations in "Hades," Joyce links Catholic rituals with Jewish burial customs and in turn loosely connects them with Chinese and Egyptian rituals. The

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[4] For major critical works that argue that Joyce is anti-Catholic see: Roy Gottfried, *Joyce's Misbelief* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2008), Frederick K. Lang, '*Ulysses' and the Irish God* (London: Associated University Presses Inc., 1993), Geert Lernout, *Help My Unbelief: James Joyce and Religion* (London: Continuum, 2010). For major critical works that argue for a Catholic Joyce see Robert Boyle, *James Joyce's Pauline Vision: A Catholic Exposition* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), Mary Lowe-Evans, *Catholic Nostalgia in Joyce and Company* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), J. Mitchell Morse, *The Sympathetic Alien: James Joyce and Catholicism* (New York: New York University Press, 1959).

inclusion of a variety of rituals and cultural references into his novel is illustrative of Joyce's desire to move beyond compartmentalizing categorizations by bringing seemingly disparate ways of coping with death together.

Joyce sees in novelistic narrative the possibility of highlighting and reinventing religion's social function by creating a text that incorporates many different religious and mythic texts as well as old songs and folktales and rituals. According to Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel,* the young Joyce was attracted to the idea of a religion of art, a notion that he moved away from in maturity, instead viewing the discovery of sacredness in everyday experience as the central goal of the artist.[5] For Joyce, daily life serves as an inspiration for art, but Irish life is undeniably shaped by Catholic rituals and informed by Catholic theology that provides a structure for understanding death and the afterlife, even for those who do not profess to believe. In particular, Joyce's conception of narrative is informed by the Catholic notion of the Resurrection, and *Ulysses* witnesses the return of the dead in the form of characters from other of Joyce's fictions; *Finnegans Wake* evokes the whole idea of wake rituals and resurrection and extends it beyond its religious associations. The resurrection of past characters and their incorporation into the *Ulyssean* narrative illustrates Joyce's principle of literary composition by which he seeks to combine a variety of religious and mythic structures into one narrative form.

Divided into episodes that correspond with those of *The Odyssey* and employing Catholic rituals and liturgy to highlight the way that religion

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[5] Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 36.

dominates everyday life in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Ulysses* is a novel deeply concerned with the narrative structures that order human life and make sense of death. Joyce employs these structures in order to interrogate their function: rather than using narrative to ward off death, or to make it understandable, Joyce seeks to highlight death's regenerative possibilities by integrating death into life. Catholic symbols and rituals, as well as snippets from poems and songs, recur throughout the text, emphasizing the way that words can be recycled and recombined to form new meanings.

By integrating religious elements into his narrative, Joyce emphasizes the similarities between religion and the novel form. Religious institutions and novels are alike to the extent that they each try to provide ways of ordering experience and deriving meaning from human life. Both religion and the novel also tend to conceive of life retrospectively: they look to the end of life to confer meaning from that terminal vantage point on what went on before. In religious belief, a good death fulfills or redeems life and promises eternity after death. In the novel, the reader finds meaning in a protagonist's life from how that life narratively ends.[6] This is not how *Ulysses* works. In that novel death inhabits life from the outset and there is no definitive ending or grand terminus. The distinguishing feature of Joyce's novel is its extraordinarily protean and energetic language. That language is teeming with association; it interlaces past experience with present

[6] See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 8. Kermode contends that literature allows us to see or understand human existence by creating an imagined beginning and end. He notes, "We project ourselves — a small, humble elect, perhaps — past the End, so as to see the structure of the whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot in the middle."

rumination and desire for the future into a single verbal weave; it meshes past, present and future into a single passing day. In this way, language itself becomes that which both contains life and assimilates death; it acquires something of the life-giving force and eternity that religions ascribe to the condition of holiness of blissful death. Novelistic narrative serves as one way of ordering language, forcing a multitude of meanings together. Instead of remaining confined to one individual's experience of the world, Joyce uses language not simply to assimilate death into life, but also to integrate a variety of individual perspectives into one communal consciousness.[7] In this way, Joyce expands the novel form and increases its fictional possibilities.

The aspects of life that Joyce's characters encounter are reflected in his uses of varying narrative modes, from free-indirect discourse to newspaper headline as well as dramatic form. Joyce's experiments in narrative form reveal the impossibility of making sense of human experience through one narrative form while celebrating the diversity of these experiences and the way they can be captured and bound together. These different forms are brought together through the inner thoughts of ordinary men and women whose memories and free-associations make up the novel's content. The style of free indirect discourse in "Telemachus" and "Hades" allows the reader access to Stephen's and Bloom's minds and reveals the ways that their perceptions and understandings of reality

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[7] Joyce refines this idea of narrative as a communal consciousness in *Finnegans Wake*. Seamus Deane argues that in the *Wake* Joyce is actually depicting a communal unconscious because, "at the conscious level so much has been repressed that amnesia is the abiding condition." See Deane, introduction to *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce (1939; repr., London: Penguin, 1992), xi.

and connections to the community have been shaped by death and loss. The inner thoughts of Stephen and Bloom reveal their anxieties about death as well as illustrating each character's lingering ties to the past and, in particular, to loved ones who have died. "Circe" features both characters' anxieties being acted out in dramatic form, highlighting the power of narrative to give shape to human thoughts and emotions, easing the fear of death by dramatizing it.

The plot of *Ulysses*, driven by death and loss and focused on the consciousness of different characters, allows interruptions and diversions in thought to shape the narrative flow as characters attempt to reconcile their individuality with the communities that surround them. These tensions between the individual and the communal and between life and death can be better understood through Freud's notion of *Eros* — a drive aimed at reinforcing communal bonds and preserving life — and the destructive death instinct which compels individuals to destroy these bonds in an effort to return to the apparent reset of an inorganic state of quiescence.[8] Joyce's novel seems at first glance to act in the service of *Eros* in that it seeks to combine different words and formal structures into larger and larger units of meaning. At the same time, part of Joyce's process of novelistic composition involves destruction — the breaking down of boundaries and the unfixing of meaning. Death, in Joyce's narrative

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[8] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 140. Brooks agues that novelistic plot is driven by its desire for ending, but also, paradoxically, resists closure as it signifies the end of desire. The plot of the novel then, functions as a working through of Freud's death instinct.

scheme, is necessary for the creation of life as well as for the process of narrative reinvention.

These two contradictory impulses — the desire for life and the drive towards death — are apparent in the narratives of many of the characters in *Ulysses*, but it is Bloom and Stephen whose experiences dominate the narrative and whose grief seems the most debilitating. Simon Dedalus is still grieving over the death of his wife (Stephen's mother) May, Paddy Dignam's family and all the people that attend Dignam's funeral are in mourning, and even Molly Bloom still laments the loss of her son, Rudy. Despite the fact that all these characters are in some way or another bereaved, Stephen and Bloom remain separated from the community, indicating their inability to re-engage with life. Though their losses appear clear to readers — Stephen is mourning the loss of his mother and Bloom's thoughts continually turn back to his father's suicide and his infant son's premature death — these characters in many ways embody Freud's theory of melancholia in that they cannot overcome their losses and are unable to fully engage with the life around them.[9]

Freud's theories of *Eros* and the death instinct are useful not only for understanding characters such as Stephen and Bloom but also because they offer insight into the textual dynamics of *Ulysses* or what Peter Brooks would call its "psychic functioning": the drives and desires that provide impetus for narrative and compel reading. The emergence of novelistic narrative as a dominant mode of

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[9] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. XIV*,* ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 244-247.

ordering life and understanding death is, Brooks argues, attributable partly to the process of secularization and marks a falling away from religious and mythic master plots.[10] Brooks elaborates this idea by asserting that novelistic plot provides a way of structuring man's experience of time and his consciousness within the limits of mortality, thereby providing some understanding of death. *Ulysses*, a novel confined to a single day, stretches its own temporal boundaries by presenting the inner thoughts of his characters whose memories and dreams extend both forwards and backwards in time. Similarly, though driven by death and loss, Joyce's novel escapes the finality of death by eluding fixed meaning, using narrative as a means for rebirth. By giving his characters' thoughts — their memories and digressions — priority over plot, Joyce ultimately frustrates the reader's desire for meaning and in so doing reinvents the function of novelistic endings.[11] Rather than serving as a binding force that fixes or freezes the meaning of the text, death in *Ulysses* works to undo the function of ending, stressing the ongoing, even endless complexity of life rather than resolving its conflicts or illuminating its meaning.

Novelistic narrative in *Ulysses* does not necessarily provide a way of making sense of death, but it offers a new perspective on human experience. For Joyce, novelistic plot is not a running down of textual energies but a regeneration

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[10] Brooks, 268.
[11] Seamus Deane, "Joyce and Nationalism," in *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 98. Deane argues that Joyce dismantles the relationship between author and reader, and instead, "he insists on the dependence of the story and the very idea of fiction upon language. Given that, he can then make language constitutive of reality, not merely regulative of it."

of the text through the recycling of old forms. The unending possibilities of words and their continual re-organization through narrative becomes Joyce's way of countering the guarantees offered by Catholicism, for he remains skeptical of national belonging as secular compensation for religion.[12] Novelistic narrative, for Joyce, cannot replace religion but instead provides a new perspective on the human experience of death, highlighting its regenerative and purifying properties and the way it binds communities together. Joyce's novel is often bawdy and lewd, taking obvious delight in sex and the pleasures of the flesh. This focus on sex and the body seems on the surface to be an affront to Catholicism. But Joyce's issue is not so much with Catholicism but with its puritanical attitude towards sex. If how we live life and death are the fundamental things, then *Ulysses* seems to say that these are what matter most and that Catholicism needs to be reminded of this.[13]

Joyce's concern with the body and with death — their functions and limitations — is particularly apparent in the appearance and reappearance in the novel of bloated and grotesque corpses, which disrupt the flow of the narrative and serve as reminders of death's often unexpected presence in life. The corpses

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[12] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 12. Anderson argues that as religious worldviews declined so too did its ability to transform fatality into continuity. In secular society the idea of nation performed the same function that religion had previously served.

[13]Lang, 16, 25. While Lang contends that Joyce's fiction reveals that he was "consistently anti-Catholic," he does note that Bloom's introduction of the word "Reincarnation" early in the novel, indicates a "return to the human flesh as the proper object of worship." Contrary to Lang's assertion, it would seem that rather than positioning human flesh as an object of worship, Joyce is returning religion to the mortal, everyday world.

encountered or envisioned by Stephen and Bloom are gruesome and are presented as rotting or decayed and are associated with emptiness and absence. The appearance of these abhorrent bodies force Stephen and Bloom to confront their fears of death and are indicative of both men's inability to cope with death or manage their grief. Their inability to move on from these losses and reengage with life is indicative of a crisis in the modern relationship to death.[14] The religious and mythic structures that once provided answers to questions of death and mortality no longer make sense to Stephen or Bloom, who struggle to reconcile their individual experience of the world with communal customs and beliefs. Lewis argues that the "fascination with corpses" apparent in the modernist literature of the nineteen-twenties can be traced in part to the trenches of World War I.[15] While this may indeed explain the prominence of dead bodies in *Ulysses*, Joyce nevertheless set the novel in 1904, before the outbreak of war; the sense of loss here cannot, then, be easily attributed to that war's atrocities, but indicates a deeper crisis in modern society with relation to death. This sense of loss is further complicated by the fact that the novel is set in Dublin at a time when Catholicism was largely dominant and provided a widely shared structure for understanding death and the afterlife.

In *Ulysses* the co-existence of old and new belief systems is apparent in the characters of Stephen and Bloom: the former is attempting to establish himself

[14] Ariela Freedman, *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3-5, 15-16. Freedman argues that in modernist novels, young, dead men indicate a crisis in masculinity and a failure of modernity. Without the shared significance of religion, the individual becomes wholly responsible for making sense of death.
[15] Lewis, 171.

as an artist and intellectual but is haunted by his past memories of his Catholic mother's death, and the latter is Jewish but has been baptized both as Protestant and as Catholic, and is religious in outward appearance but secular in belief. The incorporation of these various elements creates a sense of universality while also focusing on individual perception of reality.[16] Despite the fact that Bloom does not adhere to the beliefs of either Catholicism or Judaism, his Jewish background gives him an ability to draw parallels between different religions and to make sense of death by imagining it as a kind of equalizer. Stephen's semi-secular worldview is at odds with the devout Catholicism practiced by his mother, and he struggles to make sense of death, ultimately relying on art to do so. The dominance of Catholic conceptions of heaven and of the good death is apparent throughout *Ulysses*, but it is the narrative points of view of Bloom and Stephen that reveal the tension between individual experience of the world and Catholic structures that are meant to provide order and impart meaning to these experiences.

Aside from Reverend Conmee and Father Coffey that Bloom observes performing the Masses in "Lotus-Eaters" and "Hades," very few of the characters in the novel are devout Catholics**.** However, even though most of the characters are not devout, the historical weight of Catholicism is so substantial and its interiorization so pervasive that they nonetheless depend almost entirely upon

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[16] Deane, 102. He writes: "In breaking away from the restrictions of a local nationality and from the kinds of identity conferred upon him by tradition, Joyce achieved a language which, by the sheer number of its polyglot associations, appears to be all-inclusive and yet which, by the sheer complexity of its narrative orders, manages to be almost willfully exclusive."

Catholicism for their emotional responses to the meaning of life and death. This is particularly evident in "Hades" when Stephen's father, Simon Dedalus, stands over his wife's grave lamenting her loss and expresses a desire to die. When Mr. Powers assures him that she's in a better place now, he responds: "I suppose she's in heaven if there is a heaven."[17] It is clear that Mr. Dedalus is not a firm believer in Catholicism, and even doubts its promise of heaven; but it is also clear that Mr. Dedalus can only make sense of his grief with reference to the Catholic doctrine and rites in which his wife believes. This adherence to Catholicism even in the absence of real conviction in its teachings produces a fractured subjectivity, one which is neither devout nor atheistic, neither wholly Catholic nor wholly non-Catholic. Joyce seeks to bind these dualisms together, combining them into a narrative that weaves individual thoughts into a collective story.[18]

This chapter examines the individual narratives of Stephen and Bloom as they struggle to make sense of death and come to terms with their own mortality. The interweaving of these two narrative strands and their ultimate intersection in "Circe" offers a deeper understanding of the way that Joyce uses death as a point of novelistic re-invention which offers an alternative to Catholic guarantees of immortality in the creation of a text that evades a single fixed meaning and brings together life and death, creating a sense of continuity. Beginning with Stephen's haunting memories of his mother's death in "Telemachus," the first section

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[17] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 6:215.
[18] Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995), 58-59. Nolan comments that though *Ulysses* is not a linear story and is instead composed of many different stories, these narratives function in a complementary manner and are tied together by the persistence of "underlying narrative paradigms."

focuses on Stephen's relationship with death and his inversion or re-invention of Catholic rites and rituals in an attempt to structure and understand his experience of loss. Stephen's conception of death and its connection with art is important for an understanding of Joyce's own vision of the relationship between death and novelistic narrative. For Joyce, death is both an impetus for narrative creation and is also representative of the paralysis that can result from an overly restrictive society unable to move on from its losses. In order to overcome this inertia Joyce removes the association between death and ending by integrating death throughout the novel.

The second section examines Bloom's observations of the rituals surrounding Paddy Dignam's death in "Hades." It is in this episode that the theme of the individual's struggle to reconcile personal experience with the moral obligations and expectations of society becomes particularly apparent. Bloom's interpretation of the funeral Mass and burial is presented in a quasi-anthropological or sociological fashion, indicating his interest in human nature and society as well as serving to defamiliarize the rituals for the reader. In particular, Bloom tends to blur the lines between the sacred and the profane. Working against the contention of sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, who argues that religion binds together a moral community through the practices and beliefs that distinguish the sacred from the profane, Joyce seeks to bring together sacred and profane, life and death, rather than to further differentiate them.[19]

[19] Mark S. Cladis, introduction to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, by Émile Durkheim, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xxii.

What unites individuals in *Ulysses* is not their mutual beliefs or sense of the sacred but their shared experience of the world, the very fact of their human, mortal bodies moving through the routines of everyday life. This includes not only living bodies but also those of the dead, such as Paddy Dignam, whose corpse threatens to disrupt social order by spilling out onto the road, but also serves as food for new life as it undergoes the process of decomposition.

Section three considers the narrative shift from the free-indirect discourse of the earlier chapters to dramatic form in "Circe" as the interior thoughts and fears of Stephen and Bloom become real and are enacted. The return of the dead in this episode marks the point where the dead are no longer simply associated with memory and with the past, but must be confronted within the narrative present of the novel. By having the dead return, Joyce bridges the gap between life and death, incorporating the past into the present. In this episode, Paddy Dignam returns in the form of a beagle, while Stephen's mother appears "emaciated" and "green with gravemould," indicating both the horror of death and the idea of metempsychosis by which a spirit migrates from one body to the next.[20] These figures serve to disrupt the narrative order but also, paradoxically, provide a sense of continuity as they link the past and the present together. Most importantly, the return of the dead forces Stephen and Bloom to confront their own mortality and to reengage with life.

The fourth section focuses on the ways that Joyce uses death to reinvent novelistic ending. The novel's last episode, "Penelope," concludes with Molly

[20] Joyce, 15:385-386, 472-473.

Bloom's orgasmic climax that, while appearing simply to affirm life, is also a kind of death in its realization of desire. This ending brings the novel to conclusion by releasing its textual tensions but also, in its emulation of sexual orgasm, returns the reader to the origins of life in its mirroring of the process of conception. Using the process of bodily decomposition as a model for his narrative, Joyce breaks down old forms in order to re-assemble them in a new body of text. In his creative process of re-composition Joyce deliberately toys with the notion of novelistic narrative as a way of understanding human existence through fictional beginnings and endings. Death marks a divide between earthly existence and non-existence, between body and mind, but Joyce seeks to undo this division. Instead, he depicts life's continuity by bringing together the living and the dead, creating a text that defies notions of bodily restriction or physical limitations, moving from one character's mind to the next. Joyce at once fulfills the reader's desire for knowledge by allowing him access to the thoughts of the characters, and frustrates this desire by giving us an ending that defers meaning. In *Ulysses*, Joyce does not endow human temporality with significance by ordering his plot in a linear fashion. Rather, he submerges the reader in the experience of a single day and his novel ends with an orgasmic release of textual tensions that confirms death's presence in life.

II.

"Telemachus," the opening chapter of *Ulysses*, establishes both death and Catholicism as two of the novel's primary concerns. As the novel opens, Buck

Mulligan, bearing "a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed" holds the bowl in the air and says: "*Introibo ad altare Dei.*" [21] The Latin translates as "I will go up to God's altar" and this phrase is said by the priest at the opening of the traditional Catholic Mass, indicating Mulligan's intention mock Catholic rituals.[22] However, more than simply poking fun at the Mass, Mulligan is attempting to find a way to reach Stephen and to bring him back to reality. While Stephen is not a practicing Catholic and rejects Catholic teachings, he is grieving over his mother's death and struggling with the guilt he feels at not praying for her on her deathbed. Mulligan's reversal of the Mass provides Stephen with a way to begin to make sense of his grief by connecting religion with everyday life. It also stirs memories of his mother.

As Stephen gazes out at the Irish Sea, he is reminded of his mother's death, while also becoming aware of his own need to break with the past. The sea becomes a "bowl of bitter waters" and reminds him of his mother's deathbed and the words "*Liliata rutilantium te confessorum turma circumdet: iubilantium te virginum chorus excipiat*,"[23] part of the Latin Prayers for Dying cited in the Catholic *Layman's Missal*, which translates as: "May the glittering throng of confessors, bright as lilies gather about you. May the glorious choir of virgins receive you."[24] According to Gifford's notes, this Latin phrase was offered to commend a dying person to God and could be read in the absence of a priest by

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[21] Joyce, 1:3.
[22] Don Gifford with Robert G. Seidman, '*Ulysses' Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's 'Ulysses'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 13.
[23] Joyce, 1:9.
[24] The *Layman's Missal* (Baltimore, Md., 1962) cited in Gifford, *'Ulysses' Annotated*, 19.

any responsible man or woman.[25] This fact is significant because it indicates Stephen's conflicted feelings about his mother's death. By uttering these words, Stephen could have saved his mother from eternal damnation by performing in lieu of a priest and blessing her before her death. His refusal to do so haunts him and prevents him from moving on with his life. Religious rituals have lost their meaning for Stephen, but his way of thinking about the world and of making sense of his grief remains informed by Catholicism.

In this initial episode, death is something ghastly and fearful and is associated with the Catholic Church and with stasis. Stephen struggles to make sense of the loss of his mother while also attempting to banish his guilt. Yet even as he struggles to shake off any association with the Catholic Church and to move on from his mother's death, he remains haunted by her memory. Stephen remembers how "In a dream, silently, she had come to him, her wasted body within its loose graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, bent over him with mute secret words, a faint odour of wetted ashes."[26] The fact that his mother comes to him in a dream is indicative of the extent to which Stephen has repressed his own grief and attempted to move on without acknowledging what he has lost in his mother's death. This dream vision of May Dedalus envisions her as a ghost in "brown graveclothes" reminiscent of a monk's brown robe, possibly suggesting that she was a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, a lay organization within the Catholic Church. May's Catholic devotion, signified by the grave clothes, is made further clear by the odor of rosewood — a

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Joyce, 1:9.

popular wood for rosary beads and crosses — and wax, associated with the candles that are burned during the Catholic Mass. Part of what makes May's ghost so frightening is her wasted body which is clearly trying to tell him something that he does not understand. For Stephen, her words are "mute" and "secret" both because he cannot relate to her Catholic devotion and because she now belongs to the world of the dead. In any case, she represents something unknown to Stephen and throughout the novel he struggles to discover the secret of her words in an attempt to banish her memory. Death, in this example, simultaneously draws one back into the past while the fear of it impels one forward, pushing Stephen to fulfill his goal of becoming an artist.

Stephen's dead mother is representative of ties to Catholicism and the past that prevent him from moving forward and achieving his goal of becoming an artist. However, she is also Stephen's only connection to the social world that surrounds him and if he banishes her memory, along with the Catholicism she represents, he will not only free himself from the religious restriction, he will also lose the understanding of life's mysteries that it provided. When Stephen remembers his dream of his dead mother his response to the appearance of her ghost is: "Ghoul! Chewer of corpses! No mother! Let me be and let me live!"[27] Stephen's identification of his mother as a ghoul — an evil spirit or phantom, especially one that is supposed to rob graves and feed on dead bodies — and a chewer of corpses both indicate an association between the bodies of the dead and food or sustenance. The phrase "Chewer of corpses" is a reference to the Catholic

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[27] Joyce, 1:9.

ritual of communion in which bread, symbolizing the body of Christ, is consumed, but also suggests that May Dedalus herself gains nourishment from the dead. This association of Catholicism with his mother's corpse reminds Stephen of his own liminal position as a lapsed Catholic in a Catholic-dominated reality. It also associates Catholicism with death and stasis, as it is not the living that feed on the dead, but the dead themselves who gain nourishment.

Stephen's memories of his mother threaten to impede his engagement with life. Buck Mulligan, with his playful parody of the Catholic Mass, seems to offer a way for Stephen to move forward with his life through the reinvention or reversal of Catholic rituals. Stephen admits that he begrudges Mulligan for saying, "*O, it's only Dedalus whose mother is beastly dead*" after his mother died.[28] Mulligan responds:

> And what is death, he asked, your mother's or yours or my own? You only saw your mother die. I see them pop off every day in the Mater and Richmond and cut up into tripes in the dissecting room […] You wouldn't kneel down and pray for your mother on her deathbed when she asked you. Why? Because you have the cursed jesuit strain in you only it's injected the wrong way[29]

Mulligan attempts to ease the pain of Stephen's mother's death by making light of the situation: death is everywhere because, as a medical student, he sees so much of it. As Emer Nolan has noted, Mulligan's cavalier attitude towards death has the effect of reducing the gravity of Stephen's mother's death and, indeed,

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[28] Joyce, 1:7.
[29] Ibid.

"prefigures Bloom's demystifying reflections at Paddy Dignam's funeral."[30] By reducing death to an everyday occurrence, Mulligan desacralizes death. Stephen, however, cannot so easily adopt the idea that his mother's death lacks meaning or is without significance – hence Mulligan's comment that Stephen has the "cursed jesuit strain" in him, only "it's injected the wrong way." Stephen is unable to pray for his mother on her deathbed not simply because he does not believe in Catholicism, but also because the rituals still hold significance for him and to perform them would be hypocritical. For Mulligan, death is mundane and rituals meaningless and can therefore be performed without thought, while for Stephen death is still of utmost significance. Mulligan's description of the dead bodies that are "cut up like tripes" in the dissecting room of the hospital offers an image of the corpse not as sacred and whole but as cut up and fragmented. Joyce's process of novelistic composition in some ways resembles this process as it also involves fragmentation and desacralization. However, Joyce's ultimate goal is to restore the fracturing effects of death and to re-incorporate it into a narrative whole. Far from simply demystifying death, this process manages to retain death's mystery by fragmenting traditional structures of meaning and incorporating them into the narrative of *Ulysses*.

"Telemachus," then, establishes death as one of *Ulysses'* most prominent themes and also links this theme to Catholicism through the haunting image of May Dedalus who reminds Stephen of his ties to the Church. Stephen wants to distance himself from his mother and from the Church but lacks a structure for

[30] Nolan, 60.

making sense of death and thus maintains a certain reverence for its rituals. May Dedalus's death is presented as an improper death in the novel as it defies the Christian notions of a "good death" by which a person accepts their death, sets their affairs in order and prepares for penance.[31] Stephen's memories of his mother's death, while steeped in Catholic imagery, are not peaceful and are predominantly characterized by pain and suffering. His refusal to pray for his mother on her deathbed is at once a rejection of Catholicism as well as of the *ars moriendi* or "art of dying" that underlies the Christian concept of a good death.[32] While May died of natural causes, in Stephen's mind it is improper because of his refusal to pray for her and because of Buck Mulligan's contention that this denial constitutes a form of matricide. Mulligan mocks Stephen: "Etiquette is etiquette. He kills his mother but he can't wear grey trousers."[33] While Stephen will not adhere to the Catholic customs that require him to pray for his mother, he clings to the cultural practice of wearing black mourning clothes after the death of a loved one. Stephen's refusal to pray is evidence of his desire to break with the Catholic Church but is peculiar given his reverence for the sacred: Stephen does not entirely forsake religion or the sacred but instead seeks a way to reinvent it. Mulligan's mockery of the Church highlights Stephen's reverence for ritual and inadvertently provides a way for Stephen to re-engage with the world around him.

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[31] See Taylor, Jeremy, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (London: R. Royston, 1651), http://gateway.proquest.com.eproxy.ucd.ie/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:45783:157.

[32] See Nancy Lee Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: A Study of the Literary Tradition of the "Ars Moriendi" in England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

[33] Joyce, 1:5

Though Stephen remains skeptical of Catholicism, he lacks any other way to make sense of his mother's death.

For Stephen, art replaces religion, providing a way of understanding death by aestheticizing it. This aestheticizing of death is particularly apparent in Stephen's memories of reciting Yeats's "Who Goes with Fergus?" to his mother on her deathbed. The poem was included in the first version of Yeats's play *The Countess Cathleen*, in which the poem is sung, "to comfort the Countess, who has sold her soul to the powers of darkness so that the people might have food."[34] This provides valuable insight into the way that Stephen envisions his mother's death. Stephen blames the Church and sees his art as a way of escaping the waste of her submissive life. It is also further indicative of the way that Stephen substitutes art for the traditional Catholic prayers for the dying. Here, Stephen attempts to compensate for his refusal to pray by offering his mother the words of the poem: "She was crying in her wretched bed. For those words, Stephen: love's bitter mystery."[35] For Stephen, art and religion can be brought together through narrative but it is art, rather than religion, that has power over death. In Stephen's view, life must ultimately be sacrificed for art. But he is burdened by the conflict between his rarified intellect and his earthly body that is mortal and can decay. As Jean Kimball has noted: "This is Stephen's problem on Bloomsday: to establish a loving tie to the flesh so that he can become capable of immortalizing that flesh in

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[34] Gifford, 10.
[35] Joyce, 1:8.

art."[36] Stephen's love for his mother provided a connection to the earthly world and he must re-establish this link in order to be capable of creation. Whether or not Stephen is capable of fulfilling his role as artist is a question the novel never fully resolves, but there is a strong suggestion that Bloom provides the connection to the flesh that Stephen seeks.

The need to establish a bond with the living is evident from Stephen's expression of loneliness and desire for human contact in "Proteus": "Touch me […] I am lonely here […] I touch me soon, now. What is the word known to all men?"[37] This question returns in "Circe" when Stephen asks the ghost of his mother: "Tell me the word, mother, if you know now. The word known to all men."[38] Here Stephen assumes that death has provided his mother with an answer to his question, an answer that, significantly, is thought to be known to all. However, Stephen does not know the word and it is also kept from the reader. The reader's sense of frustration increases as Stephen's desire for meaning is left unsatisfied and he continues to wonder about the word; critics have speculated that the word is either 'love' or 'death.'[39] It is significant that critical

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[36] Jean Kimball, "Love and Death in 'Ulysses': 'Word Known to All Men,' *James Joyce Quarterly*. 24, no.2 (Winter 1987): 143-60, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25476793.

[37] Joyce, 3:41.

[38] Ibid., 15:474.

[39] Richard Ellman, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) 147, 174. Ellman asserts that this word is "love." He supports this point in his review of Gabler's edition of *Ulysses* by citing a passage from "Scylla and Charybdis" recovered by Gabler. See Ellman, "The Big Word in *Ulysses*: Review of *Ulysses: A Critical and Synoptic Edition* by James Joyce, prepared by Hans Walter Gabler, by Wolfhard Steppe, by Claus Melchoir Garland 1919," *The New York Review of Books* Oct. 25: 1984, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1984/oct/25/the-big-word-in-ulysses/.

interpretations of this word have juxtaposed love and death, a textual pattern already established in the novel. Kimball concludes that the "word known to all men" is neither love nor death but the relationship between the two: "Love makes life possible, and Stephen, if he accepts Bloom as the flesh in him, can solve his problem and conquer death through life and art, for Bloom is the flesh that completes the spirit in Stephen, a psychic fact that is made visual in the Gilbert schema where the first three episodes are shown with no corresponding organs."[40] The tensions between life/love and death are what compel the plot of *Ulysses*, but this tension cannot be resolved by one overpowering the other. Joyce seeks a word that can encompass both love and death, indicating his desire to bring together beginning and ending. Throughout the novel Stephen struggles with his mother's death and his desire to break with the Church. However, since he lacks replacements for the religious structures that make sense of death and offer consolation, Stephen remains unable to move on with life. Bloom, with his demystification of religious ritual and obsession with the body, provides the connection to life that is necessary for Stephen to re-engage with life and overcome his mother's death. The reappearance of Stephen's mother's ghost throughout *Ulysses* becomes indicative of Joyce's process of narrative re-composition, which brings together sacred and profane through narrative reordering that borrows the forms of religion and myths to tell the tale of daily life.

This goes against Hugh Kenner's contention that the word is "death." See Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), 129.

[40] Kimball, 156.

III.

Joyce's desire to reverse traditional novelistic plot in order to reinvent it is particularly apparent in "Hades," where the distinctions between sacred and profane, religious and secular, begin to breakdown. The reversal of sacred/profane, public/private, religious/secular and beginning/ending is made possible through the consciousness of Leopold Bloom. Bloom's thoughts about the rotting corpses in Glasnevin cemetery in particular are indicative of death's ability to generate new life, acting as impetus and fuel for narrative and positioning death as a beginning rather than simply an end to the novel. "Hades" begins with Bloom stepping into the funeral carriage that will carry him, along with Simon Dedalus, Martin Cunningham and Jack Power, to Prospect (Glasnevin) cemetery for the funeral of Paddy Dignam, who has died of alcoholism. The rituals surrounding death bring these men together, yet Bloom's unfamiliarity with Catholic practices and his modern ideas about burial and the transportation of the corpse distance him from this community.

The contrast between traditional customs and modern innovations is established by Simon Dedalus's comment that the funeral procession passing through the center of Dublin in order for everyone to pay respect is "a fine old custom" and that he is "glad to see it has not died out."[41] The very fact that Dedalus makes this comment suggests that there is a danger that old customs are being lost, but that public funeral processions such as this still hold communal

[41] Joyce, 6:73.

value.[42] Significantly, Bloom does not hold the custom in the same reverence as Dedalus. Later in the episode when the carriage encounters a drove of cattle headed to the slaughterhouse, Bloom remarks, "[…] and another thing I have often thought, is to have municipal funeral trams like they have in Milan, you know. Run the line out to the cemetery gates and have special trams, hearse and carriage and all."[43] Bloom seeks the most modern and efficient way to transport the corpse to its resting site, indicating his progressive and innovative way of seeing, but also hinting at the power of technology to remove the dead from everyday life.[44] For the technologically-minded Bloom, it is not tradition or the visibility of the coffin that is important but the speed with which it can reach the cemetery. Most importantly, Joyce chooses to put the reader inside the funeral procession instead of outside of it, as a participant rather than an observer. At the same time, our impressions of the procession are filtered through Bloom who, though he is inside the carriage, focuses on the life outside the window as well as on the conversation around him, thereby linking public and private. This focus on

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[42] See Julieann Ulin, "Famished Ghosts': Famine Memory in James Joyce's *Ulysses*," *Joyce Studies Annual* (2011): 30, doi: 10.1353/joy.2011.0015. Ulin notes: "Although this custom returned in 1904, Simon's remark conceals the fact that the tradition is not without a very significant interruption. Famine burials in mass graves, the inability to obtain a coffin for remains and corpses devoured by wild animals along the road, represent an unspeakable history contained in Simon's statement."

[43] Joyce, 81.

[44] Alan Warren Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23. Friedman suggests that modern society has made death false and unnatural. He writes, "[w]hether hiding or forestalling death in hospitals or enacting it massively in wars, modern technology removed death from the home and rendered it artificial, arranged, civilization's chief product; its dehumanized subjects were distanced from what had long been the 'natural' site and processes of living and dying."

individual consciousness breaks with traditional narrative forms that maintain consistent narrative style and point of view. At the same time, this break ultimately allows for the novel to connect ancient customs with religious rituals as well as with innovative modern thought. Bloom's observations of Dublin are extremely detailed in his descriptions of shops, houses and monuments but also incredibly personal in the memories and associations these places evoke in him. This mode of narration serves to ground the reader in social reality while also having a defamiliarizing effect, making these places strange and forcing the reader to see common objects in a new light. This method of making the old new through narrative perspective is made especially apparent when Bloom observes the social rituals surrounding Dignam's funeral and finds links between Irish Catholic, Jewish, and pagan rituals.

Throughout "Hades" Bloom remains focused on the cleanliness of his own body in contrast to the decaying corpse of Paddy Dignam. As he listens to the conversation around him, he notices how clean his nails are and remembers the cake of soap in his pocket. This is particularly significant considering Bloom's earlier comments that the laying out of the corpse is an "unclean job" and later comparing the smell of the decaying corpse to that of rotted cheese.[45] Paddy Dignam's funeral reminds Bloom of his own mortality, the cake of soap, as a symbol of purity, soothes him. For most of "Hades," Bloom remains focused on Paddy Dignam's body: he thinks about how death has transformed it, what will happen to it as it decays, and what it will smell like. Bloom's thoughts about those

[45] Joyce, 6: 72, 89, 94.

who deal with the dead such as the women who lay out the body, and the Glasnevin groundskeeper, John O'Connell, associates them with the earth and the unclean. This is characteristic of Jewish belief that the corpse is a source of pollution and transmits uncleanliness, which may explain why throughout the "Hades" episode Bloom is obsessed with the cleanliness of his fingernails.[46] Joyce sets up this contrast between cleanliness and decay to emphasize the way that death separates the unclean body from the supposedly pure soul. The process of bodily decomposition then breaks down this distinction and has a purifying effect.

The sense of reinventing old forms is furthered by the contrast between Bloom's unorthodox views and comments on death, and the traditional views held by the others in the funeral carriage. When Mr. Dedalus comments that Dignam "went" very suddenly and Cunningham and Powers lament his passing, Bloom tries to be optimistic: "—The best death, Mr. Bloom said. Their wideopen eyes looked at him. —No suffering, he said. A moment and all is over. Like dying in sleep. No one spoke."[47] Here Bloom defies an unspoken social code by not lamenting Dignam's unexpected death but instead suggesting that he had the best death possible. In fact, Bloom's conception of sudden death being "the best death" defies many of the Christian rules on how to die a good death as elaborated in documents such as the medieval *Tractatus* — a six-chapter treatise on rituals and practices of death — as well as the *Ars Moriendi*, which features illustrations of the dying surrounded by temptation. As Alan Warren Friedman argues: "The

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[46] Zvi Sobel and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Tradition, Innovation, Conflict: Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Israel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 84.
[47] Joyce, 6:79.

ideal text of ideal dying, the *ars moriendi*, can be written and performed only in a world with sufficient time and attention for ritual endings."[48] Dignam's sudden death does not offer time for an "ideal dying" nor does it provide him with a chance to atone or to be forgiven for his sins. There is a sense here that death is random and chaotic. Bloom's unique perspective on death and his reinterpretation of Catholic funeral rituals indicate a need for an alternate way of making sense of death, not by abandoning the old structures but by merging them.

In spite of the suddenness of his death, Dignam's memory is redeemed in Bloom's mind not through adherence to religious means of achieving salvation, but by association with the monument that commemorates the Irish Protestant nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell, who also died of a heart attack. Just after he comments on sudden death as being the best kind, Bloom observes the sights out of the window of the carriage. He thinks: "Dead side of the street this," before observing, "Foundation stone for Parnell. Breakdown. Heart."[49] Again, as in Stephen's search for a word to encompass love and death, Bloom associates death with the heart — the human organ most associated with love. Dignam is linked to Parnell through the words "Breakdown. Heart," as these are the exact words that Martin Cunningham has earlier used to describe Dignam's own death. When Bloom notes that the street is "dead" he simply means that there is not one on it, but the image of a dead street further enhances the episode's prevalent mood of otherworldliness and death. Significantly, the Dublin streets are "dead" to

[48] Friedman, 47.
[49] Joyce, 6:79.

Bloom while the cemetery is full of activity and life.[50] The foundation of a memorial to Parnell is being constructed, but in Bloom's mind this structure is not associated with progress but with a collapse. As the heart breaks down a stone monument is erected in its place. This passage is indicative of Joyce's skepticism regarding the substitution of national belonging for religious. The foundation for collective memory here stems from a breakdown, national identity found in memorializing the dead not truthfully but in a way that builds national morale. Instead of building a community around an idealization of the dead — one that elevates them to a heroic status beyond that of ordinary men — Joyce seeks to integrate the memories of the dead into life, forging a community through a shared sense of life's ability to rejuvenate and renew.

Like Dignam's inauspicious demise, nearly all the deaths in *Ulysses* are improper, either because they are sudden or unexpected or due to the fact that the rituals surrounding them are poorly or indecorously executed. Beginning with May Dedalus's death from cancer which was proper and natural in that she had sufficient time to arrange her departure but whose "good death" was compromised by Stephen's failure to pray for her on her deathbed, all the deaths in the novel fail in some way or another to achieve a "good" or "holy" death.[51] It

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[50] R.M. Adams, "Hades," in *James Joyce's 'Ulysses': Critical Essays,* eds. Clive Hart and David Hayman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 99-100. He notes: "It is probably natural that 'Hades' (an episode described as using the primary technique of 'incubism') should carry out, more than any other unit of *Ulysses*, the major theme of *Dubliners*, that Ireland is a land of walking ghosts and barely vitalized corpses."

[51] Friedman, 137. Friedman comments on Stephen's failure to pray for his dying mother and notes that: "Joyce implies that the refusal of one ritual, bedside prayer

is significant that the other deaths in the novel are improper in themselves, and that the rituals surrounding death are made ineffective through Bloom's narrative point of view. The various improper deaths include Dignam's sudden death from alcoholism followed by Bloom's memories of his father's suicide and his infant son Rudy's premature death, as well as the child's funeral Bloom's cortege passes on the way to Glasnevin. Bloom thinks of how the Friendly Society helped to pay for Rudy's funeral: "Our. Little. Beggar. Baby. Meant nothing. Mistake of nature. If it's healthy it's from the mother. If not from the man."[52] Rudy's death itself is not only untimely but Bloom's sadness is enhanced by his inability to pay for the burial. Further humiliation is added by the bearing the death has on Bloom's sense of masculinity. In ancient Jewish belief, the health of the child is said to be a reflection on the male's virility.[53] Here ancient belief seeps into modern life in Bloom's mind. As a modern man, Bloom rationally knows that his young son's death has no bearing on his own manhood, but he cannot shake the old beliefs that emasculate him. Again, *Eros* — the sexual love/life instinct — is intimately connected to death and, in this example, Rudy's death threatens Bloom's desire for life and harms his sexual relationship with Molly. Rudy's death, as well as the other deaths and corpses littered throughout *Ulysses*, works to disrupt social order in the novel, revealing the underlying old customs, superstitions, and religious beliefs that inform conceptions of life and death.

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for the dying, ruined another: the funeral and mourning for Stephen's mother that are also elided."

[52] Joyce, 6:79.

[53] Gifford, 111.

Death's ability to disrupt or overturn narrative and social order is nowhere more apparent than in the "Hades" funeral procession when Bloom envisions Paddy Dignam's corpse spilled out on the road. When his companions in the carriage tell the story of how a coffin once bumped open along the same road they are now travelling, Bloom imagines Paddy Dignam's "Red face: grey now. Mouth fallen open. Asking what's up now. Quite right to close it. Looks horrid open. Then the insides decompose quickly. Much better to close up all the orifices. Yes, also. With wax. The sphincter loose. Seal up all."[54] In this passage Bloom captures both the gross physical realities of death and also points out the way that a corpse becomes an artifact or "memory picture."[55] Death is a loss, a gradual wasting away evident in the emptiness of Dignam's body, his gaping mouth and rotting insides. Society desires to fill in these holes, to seal up the corpse's orifices in order to make it look life-like. While wax to Stephen recalls the devotional candles used during Catholic ceremonies and reminds him of his mother, wax to Bloom is a tool for sealing things up, preventing leakage.[56] The gaping body is horrid because it is a visual reminder of loss and of the emptiness of death. Bloom recognizes the desire to conceal the emptiness instead of taking the funeral rites at face value. He sees the need of society to "seal all up," to keep death sanitized. The corpse is deployed to signal presence rather than absence. The image of

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[54] Joyce, 6:81.
[55] Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1978), 91, 164. Mitford describes the process by which a corpse is embalmed and transformed into a beautiful memory picture for the living to remember the dead. Bloom's comments here indicate a similar desire to hide death's horror or ugliness.
[56] Joyce, 1:5.

Paddy Dignam's upset corpse is also indicative of the work that death does in the narrative of *Ulysses*. Death disturbs the novel's order, causing an overflow of memories and associations that run backwards and forwards across the novel's temporal boundaries. Rather than filling in the gaping holes of meaning in the body of his text, Joyce allows them to remain open as a reminder of absence to be filled in by the reader's imagination.

This element of absence made present or of the past becoming fodder for new life is something that occupies Bloom's mind during Dignam's funeral Mass and burial. At Mass, Bloom seems to recognize the burial rituals themselves but fails to comprehend their liturgical meaning. As the priest sprinkles holy water on the coffin Bloom thinks: "As you were before you rested. It's all written down: he has to do it."[57] Here Bloom sees the ritual merely for what it is: a burial rite. He finds the ritual comic because he doesn't believe in life after death and finds "rest" an absurd euphemism for death. Bloom then notes: "Holy water that was, I expect. Shaking sleep out of it. He must be fed up with that job, shaking that thing over all the corpses as they trot up…All the year round he prayed the same thing over them: sleep. On Dignam now."[58] Bloom trivializes the sacred water by referring to the aspergillum, the vessel used in Catholic ceremonies to sprinkle holy water, as "that thing" and marveling at the masses of people the priest must bless with it. While Bloom desacralizes the Mass by making its rituals mundane, he also calls the finality of death into question by suggesting that the holy water will simply put everyone under the spell of sleep. Interestingly, for Stephen, water

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[57] Ibid, 6:86.
[58] Ibid.

is associated not with peaceful sleep but with the nightmarish vision of his dead mother and of drowning.[59] References to the sea as "bitter water" recur throughout the novel. The water that Stephen sees as "bitter" is contrasted with holy water that is supposed to bless and purify. To Stephen, the water is unpleasant, reminding him of the failure of ritual. In Bloom's reinterpretation of ritual the holy water still has the magical ability to unite all in sleep, from which there is the possibility of awakening.

The sense of the dead as lying just beneath the surface of the earth, waiting to awaken, is furthered by Bloom's description of burial. Bloom's musings on burial are earthy and grotesque, focused on the way the corpse feeds new life. When imagining the women who would marry the cemetery's groundskeeper, John O'Connell, and live in the cemetery, Bloom thinks: "You might pick up a young widow here. Men like that. Love amongst the tombstones. Romeo. Spice of pleasure. In the midst of death we are in life. Both ends meet. Tantalising for the poor dead. Smell of grilled beefsteaks to the starving."[60] In this example, the burial site becomes the setting for an amorous meeting and the cemetery is transformed into a place of procreation, the beginning of life rather than the end. Particularly intriguing is the image of the dead being tantalized by the smell of life that lures them from their graves, since the dead in Bloom's description are hungry for life. This sense of the dead is a direct inversion of

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[59] Joyce, 1:38, 3:38. In "Telemachus" Stephen associates the sea with his mother and in particular, with the china bowl that held her vomit on her sick bed. In "Proteus" Stephen describes his father as "a drowning man" and laments, "I could not save her. Waters: bitter death: lost."
[60] Joyce 6:89.

Stephen's earlier reference to his mother as a "chewer of corpses." Bloom's inversion of this image from the living feeding off of Christ, to the dead feeding off the living, functions in similar way to his descriptions of the Mass; they return the focus to everyday life rather than the religious or supernatural. Even more importantly, it suggests a means of resurrection outside of the institution of the Catholic Church. Bloom's observation of Dignam's funeral in "Hades" transforms fixed rituals into something innovative. The dead of Glasnevin cemetery are restless in their graves and, like the corpse that rises from the sea in "Proteus," or Dignam's overturned casket, they threaten to rise up and disturb the social order, refiguring death as shocking and ghoulish rebirth.

In *Ulysses* this connection between birth and death is embodied in the figure of the woman who delivers a child but in the Irish tradition also has the job of laying out the corpse. [61] Musing on the women who prepared Dignam's body, Bloom thinks: "Extraordinary the interest they take in a corpse. Glad to see us go we give them such a trouble in coming. Job seems to suit them. Huggermugger in corners. Slop about in slipperslapper's for fear he'd wake. Then getting it ready. Laying it out."[62] Here the beginning and end of life meet in the figure of the woman who both gives birth to new life but also prepares the corpse for burial. In a similar fashion, *Ulysses* itself begins with Stephen's mourning over his mother's death and his attempts to separate from her, and ends with Molly Bloom's endorsement of life, further enhancing the idea of the mother's body as a site of both death and birth. As R.M. Adams has noted, "the word 'slipper-slapper' gets

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[61] Gifford, 105.
[62] Joyce, 6: 72.

double resonance here from the circumstances under which it appears nearly four hundred pages later in 'Circe'."[63] In "Circe" Bloom asks, "Is this Mrs. Mack's?" And Zoe answers, "No, eightyone. Mrs. Cohen's. You might go farther and fare worse. Mother Slipperslapper. (familiarly) She's on the job herself tonight with the vet her tipster that gives her all the winners and pays for her son in Oxford."[64] Adams interprets this repetition of the word to indicate that Bloom in "Circe" has again returned to a house of death, but also notes the connotations with Old Cohen's bed as one of both conception and birth and of sleep and death.[65] Of further importance is Gifford's note that the phrase "slipper-slapper" is often attributed to a song entitled "The Fox" or "Old Mother slipper-slapper" in which the mother is a surrogate for Ireland.[66] Joyce builds on this association of Ireland and mother to further his idea of it as a place of stasis and death as well as resurgence and life. Burial is particularly important to this transformation, as "huggermugger" is a word used to refer to the secret way that Polonius was interred in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Polonius is buried without ceremony to hide the fact that it is Hamlet who has killed him. The word "huggermugger" implies secrecy and also suggests a lack of ceremony to the burial. However, in Bloom's mind, the secrecy attached to the women's laying out the corpse is not due to a lack of ceremony but to an adherence to ritual. The way the women are described sneaking around is a result of their fear of waking the dead. Here again we have the idea of the dead as asleep and fear is associated with their rising. Bloom's

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[63] Adams, 111.
[64] Joyce, 15:388.
[65] Adams, 111.
[66] Gifford, 105.

particular concern with burial can be seen as part of Joyce's attempt to use bodily decay as a model for narrative with old forms nourishing the new. For Joyce, the body's ability to regenerate offers the possibility of the dead returning in altered form, linking the revival of the corpse with the Catholic resurrection.

IV.

The dead who have been threatening to return throughout the novel finally do re-emerge in "Circe," which serves as a kind of climax to the novel as the inner consciousness of Stephen and of Bloom seem to converge in a hallucinatory phantasmagoria. "Circe" is set in a brothel in the red-light district of Dublin known as Nighttown. This episode, unlike others in the novel, is presented in the dramatic form, suggesting that Stephen and Bloom's inner thoughts are not longer being presented as monologue but are being acted out in contrapuntal dialogue. This shift in forms indicates a connection between the individual and reality and is further suggestive of the individual's power to shape or alter his or her social reality. It also suggests that Stephen and Bloom have found a potential way of overcoming their grief by incorporating their memories of the dead into life. In this episode, the dead souls of *Ulysses* including Rudy, Stephen's mother and Paddy Dignam, all reappear. Additionally, characters from other of Joyce's fictional works are reincarnated as well. These include: Tom Kernan, Joe Hynes, Paddy Leonard, Nosey Flynn, Lenehan, Crofton, Mrs. Riorden and Father Farley as well as characters from history, among them Charles Stewart Parnell's brother, John Howard Parnell, and the Irish Evicted Tenants. Joyce also gives dramatic

voice to “Old Sins” and even to “the Gramophone.” Paddy Dignam reemerges, in the form of a beagle with Dignam’s face, to defend Bloom. His reappearance returns to the novel’s recurrent theme of metempsychosis or the “transmigration of souls,” the idea that the deceased can return in some new form, either animal or human. When Bloom asks how it is possible that Dignam should speak with the voice of Esau, the ghost of Paddy Dignam replies: “By metempsychosis. Spooks.”[67] Earlier in the day, in “Calypso,” Molly asks Bloom what “metempsychosis” means, and Bloom replies: “It’s Greek: from the Greek. That means the transmigration of souls.”[68] When Molly asks him to explain it in a simpler way, Bloom thinks: “Bone them young so they metempsychosis. That we live after death. Our souls. That a man’s soul after he dies, Dignam’s soul….”[69] In “Circe,” then, we have a direct manifestation of Bloom’s earlier thoughts about metempsychosis. The theme of metempsychosis is used by Joyce as a fictional technique that through free-indirect discourse allows the narration to move from the consciousness of Stephen, on to that of Bloom and Molly, and reveals Joyce’s conception of narrative itself. For Joyce, the novel form not only provides access to the inner consciousness of the individual, but also brings together these various voices through imagination. “Circe,” then, is more than merely the acting out of the unconscious of Stephen and Bloom; it is also a manifestation of the desires that impel the novel itself. If the novel is driven by a need to know or understand death, the resurrection of the dead in this episode promises a fulfillment of that

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[67] Joyce, 15:386.
[68] Ibid., 4:52.
[69] Ibid., 4:53.

desire. However, the dead provide no answers about the meaning of life or the hereafter and the focus of the text after "Circe" shifts to the living.

"Circe" offers a distillation of narrative that slows time from the rapidly moving thoughts of the characters in free-indirect discourse to the descriptions of the characters' actions and their communications with each other in dialogue form. In many ways this dialogue acts as a way of dramatizing Stephen's and Bloom's unconscious. It is significant that the shift in forms breaks the temporal boundaries of the novel that separate past events from present as the dead return. The reappearance of Stephen's mother represents the return of the past, and with it the Catholic conceptions of sin and suffering that Stephen wants to leave behind. Here, Stephen again seeks from his mother the "word known to all men" which he believes she knows.[70] The mother does not answer S but instead beseeches Stephen to pray. Stephen's confrontation with his mother's ghost gives him the power to finally break with the past. Joyce describes Stephen's reaction to his mother's benediction: "*He lifts his ashplant high with both hands and smashes the chandelier. Time's livid flame leaps and, in the following darkness, ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry*."[71] Stephen smashes not only the chandelier but frees "time's livid flame," a suggestion that time has in some sense been shattered, the divide between mortal and eternal life broken. This break results in a temporary lapse into darkness and is suggestive of the redisposition of narrative structures that will ensue. As the episode progresses, distant voices are heard calling, "Dublin's burning! Dublin's burning!" followed by the description:

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[70] Joyce 15:474.
[71] Ibid., 15:475.

"*The midnight sun is darkened. The earth trembles. The dead of Dublin from Prospect and Mount Jerome in white sheepskin overcoats and black goatfell cloaks arise and appear to many. A chasm opens with a noiseless yawn.*"[72] According to Gifford, these stage directions mimic the description of the aftermath of the Crucifixion: " '…and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many' (Matthew 27: 51-53)."[73] Joyce's deliberate evocation of the Biblical description of Christ's resurrection indicates a desire to make the mundane sacred, but also reveals the underlying need of the characters to believe in the immortality that Catholicism provides. By borrowing the language of the Bible and applying the description of the aftermath of the Crucifixion to Dublin during a night in the brothel, Joyce is indicating the importance of the episode as a turning point in the novel. This passage has strong apocalyptic overtones from the Book of Revelations, the last book of the Bible. As in the Crucifixion, one world must be destroyed so that another can begin. The dead here rise up out of the earth not due to Christ's sacrifice, but due to Joyce's narrative re-composition. Rather than separating living from dead, Joyce seeks to join them together and bring them into conversation. The similarities in these descriptions indicate Joyce's attempt to satiate the human desire for meaning and relieve anxieties surrounding death by creating a kind of "immortal" text with endless possibilities. This represents a shift in the novel's focus from mourning and loss to the process of

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[72] Joyce, 15:488-89.
[73] Ibid., 15:525-526.

coming to life. In "Circe" Joyce conveys the horror of death and the way the trauma inhabits the unconscious imaginations of its characters. But while the scene registers the deep psychic wishes of Stephen and Bloom, it does so in serio-comic fashion. The episode combines the tragic, the grotesque and the comic, even hilarious in a highly skilled way. The reader is torn between a sense of the episode as traumatic or tragic and a sense of it as comic roustabout.

As "Circe" nears its conclusion, the reader witnesses a breakdown of fixed structures of sense making and order. This becomes evident in Stephen's fragmented sentences near the end of the episode when he cannot even remember Yeats's poem "Who Goes with Fergus" that he recited to his mother on her death bed: with "*prolonged vowels"* Stephen murmurs, "Who…drive…Fergus now And pierce…wood's woven shade."[74] At first Bloom, who has attempted to wake Stephen up, is puzzled by the words. When Stephen continues, "…shadows…the woods…white breast…dim sea," Bloom thinks how Stephen looks like his mother and misinterprets his words, thinking they describe an amorous encounter with a girl. The poem that reminded Stephen of his mother's deathbed and haunted him from the beginning of the novel now becomes disjointed and, through Bloom's misreading, becomes associated with the promise of romantic love rather than with death. Here, as elsewhere, Bloom's interpretation makes the old new, reversing the old associations and finding in them new possibilities. In this way, the scene may also be indicative of Stephen's progress towards

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[74] Joyce, 15:497.

overcoming his mother's death. "Circe" then, represents a watershed moment in *Ulysses* when the novel begins to remake and reform itself.

At the end of "Circe," Bloom's dead son Rudy appears dressed in an "Eton suit with glass shoes and a little bronze helmet," reading a Jewish text.[75] Bloom calls to him, but Rudy does not see him. The resurrection of Rudy is indicative of a return to innocence as the "white lambkin" he carries is a symbol of sacrifice and innocence in the Jewish context, and, in the Christian context, is suggestive of Jesus or the Lamb of God.[76] Rudy's appearance carries with it connotations of redemption from sin, a cleansing of all that has taken place in the brothel during this episode. However, Rudy's appearance is also contingent on the episode's Black Mass and its reversal of the Catholic Mass. The Black Mass is a Satanic ritual in which the Christian Mass in inverted and perverted and is associated with the Witches' Sabbath.[77] It is significant that the Black Mass is primarily concerned with reversal, and Joyce's use of this particular ritual indicates a further desire to undo meaning through repetition with a difference. Far from suggesting that Joyce is attempting to endow these rituals with some kind of satanic meaning, this reversal instead entails a loosening of meaning and a relaxation of boundaries. The dramatic form provides a way for Stephen and Bloom's thoughts and desires to become actualized, allowing the characters that torment their dreams and memories to appear before them and to engage in dialogue. Not only does the dramatic form provide a way for Joyce to dramatize

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[75] Ibid., 15:497.
[76] Joyce, Ibid. and Gifford, 529.
[77] Gifford, 527.

unconscious thoughts of Stephen and Bloom, allowing them to become substantiated, it also further stretches the boundaries of the novel form, confusing beginning and ending.

Far from simply functioning as a form of blasphemy, the Black Mass in "Circe" further desacralizes Catholic rituals in order reverse notions of the sacred and the profane. Here Joyce is attempting to reconcile human mortality, the death of the body, with the notion of immortality and the idea of the eternal soul that leaves the body at the moment of death. While most novels attempt to depict the linear progression of a protagonist's life from birth to death, *Ulysses* is focused on people's experience of the world as contained in a single day. Through his use of free-indirect discourse and shifting narrative forms, Joyce is attempting to create a novel that offers a view of a communal consciousness bound by a shared experience of the world. The endless recycling of old forms offers a new means of understanding the world, not by dividing the living from the dead but by bringing together these extremes. The function of religion in society is then radicalized, shifting from a restrictive and prohibitive force to a connective one that brings together disparate elements. "Circe" marks a shift in the novel where death becomes integrated into life, its function reversed. Instead of moving towards death — the endpoint at which mortal and eternal life are divided — the plot of *Ulysses* repeats itself, bringing back the dead and reinvigorating textual energies by shifting forms, creating a narrative with endless meanings.

V.

Ulysses' final episode, "Penelope," functions as a climax to the plot of the novel in its orgasmic release of textual tensions, but it also uses memories of the past to rejuvenate the present, undoing the normative function of ending by affirming death in life. Molly Bloom's monologue incorporates the novel's various themes into a breathless stream of consciousness narrative that serves as both a culmination of textual desire but also, paradoxically, the reawakening of textual energies. In its realization of desire the monologue represents a kind of death, but Molly's persistent use of the word "yes" and the narrative emulation of sexual climax seem to contradict this notion, suggesting that this ending is closer to a burst of new life rather than death. However, rather than simply affirming life, Joyce is, in fact, confirming death's presence in life and hinting at death's regenerative abilities. Throughout this episode Molly's thoughts and associations run together, linking thoughts of Paddy Dignam's funeral to memories of Stephen's mother and recollections of little Rudy's death. The episode does not follow the traditional rules of punctuation and is divided into eight exorbitant sentences, giving the narrative a sense of movement and fluidity, indicative of the continuity between life and death, beginning and ending. Thoughts and images of death recur throughout her soliloquy but it does not prevent Molly from continuing her life or her narrative. Beginning the novel with the loss of Stephen's mother, Joyce ends with Molly's grief for her dead son, establishing her role as a mother figure who embraces both birth and death in her final "yes."

“Penelope” begins with Molly lying in the bed she shares with Leopold, returning to the novel’s earlier associations of the bed as a site of conception and birth as well as death. This setting recalls the end of “Hades” when Bloom leaves the cemetery and thinks: “Plenty to see and hear and feel yet. Feel live warm beings near you. Let them sleep in their maggoty beds. They are not going to get me this innings. Warm beds: warm fullblooded life.”[78] Bloom is celebrating the triumph of life over death, associating life with warmth, blood and human contact. The mention of maggots that feed on corpses recalls the earlier mention of the dead as fuel for new life. Bloom’s affirmation of life over death in some ways prefigures Molly’s soliloquy but with a vital difference: in “Penelope” death is not simply escaped, but incorporated into life. In Molly’s narrative love and death are associated through sexual orgasm — *la petite mort* — which is at once a kind of death in its satisfaction of desire but also carries with it the possibility of conceiving new life. Through Molly’s monologue Joyce links beginning and ending together, deferring any final meaning achieved by novelistic ending.

Molly’s monologue defies the rules of grammar and traditional novelistic discourse, but rather than dismantling or breaking down the structures of the novel form, Joyce employs this strategy to forge a continuity between life and death, text and life. The link between text and life is apparent not only in the style of the episode — which is written as if Molly were speaking her thoughts aloud — but also in the way that the letters and newspapers feature in the monologue itself. Molly considers the possibility that Bloom is cheating on her, “[…] because

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[78] Joyce, 6:94.

the day before yesterday he was scribbling something in a letter when I came into the front room to show him Dignams death in the paper as if something told me and he covered up with the blottingpaper pretending to be thinking about business so very probably that was it to somebody who thinks she has a softy in him because all men get a bit like that at his age […].”[79] Here, one text intersects with another as Molly interrupts Bloom's letter writing to show him the newspaper with Dignam's obituary in it. The image of Bloom covering up the letter with blotting paper is suggestive of the ink from texts bleeding together. The news of Dignam's death works to reveal underlying fears and tensions in the Blooms' marriage. Significantly, none of this information is related through dialogue but through the reading and circulation of texts. Letters and newspapers in this instance serve as a bridge between individual thoughts and the everyday world. Joyce's use of these texts indicates his faith in the possibility of narrative to bind people together and to create continuity between life and death.

Much like the texts that link individual thoughts together, Molly's soliloquy itself serves to combine the novel's characters and events with her own memories and associations, serving to link present and past. The newspaper in particular, provides Molly with a knowledge of events in the novel that she did not witness: "[…] this is the fruits of Mr. Paddy Dignam yes they were all in great style at the grand funeral in the paper Boylan brought in if they saw a real officers funeral thatd be something reversed arms muffled drums […] they call that friendship killing and then burying one another and they all with their wives and

[79] Ibid., 18:608.

families at home."[80] The newspaper offers Molly a glimpse of the men in their funeral attire and she scoffs at the idea that Dignam's funeral was grand or stylish by comparing it with an officer's funeral. Dignam has died of alcoholism but Molly blames his friends for his death, commenting that men's version of friendship involves "killing and then burying one another," suggesting that a man is more important to his friends after he has died than during his life. These thoughts cause Molly to lament Dignam's death and to especially feel sorry for the wife and children he left behind. Molly's thoughts of Dignam's death, rather than pausing or ending the narrative, instead multiply her thoughts and associations, leading her from Dignam to May Dedalus, to Stephen and then to Rudy. Joyce deliberately does this to give a sense of death as a force that multiplies and re-generates. The lack of punctuation and persistent use of the word "yes" gives the monologue an incantatory quality, as if Molly is tying these events together and affirming their continuity through her narrative.

Molly's thoughts about Stephen, in particular, serve to link the beginning and the end of the novel together. Molly remembers how eleven years ago she saw Stephen with his father and mother driving to the Kingsbridge station. She remembers: "I was in mourning thats 11 years ago now yes hed be 11 though what was the good in going into mourning for what was neither one thing nor the other of course he insisted hed go into mourning for the cat I suppose hes a man by now by this time he was an innocent boy then […]."[81] In this passage there is a fusing of past, present and future as Molly remembers how the first time she saw

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[80] Ibid., 18:636.
[81] Ibid., 18:637.

Stephen she was in mourning for Rudy and in retrospect considers this mourning pointless, and imagines Stephen as a man now. Molly's use of the pronoun "he" is confusing as she uses it to refer in this passage to both Stephen and to Bloom, who she thinks overly sentimental, as he would mourn for the cat if it died. Molly's narrative brings together Stephen and Bloom through an association with death and mourning, in turn, aiding in her recollection of her own grief. Though she seems here to have come to terms with Rudy's death, a few pages later it is evident that she blames herself in some way for the loss. Molly's sense of guilt stems from her belief that she cursed Rudy's birth because she and Bloom conceived him after she became aroused while watching two dogs mate.[82] She goes on to reason: "I shouldn't have buried him in that wooly jacket I knitted crying as I was but give it to some poor child but I knew well Id never have another our 1st death too it was but we were never the same since O Im not going to think myself into the glooms about that any more I wonder why he wouldnt stay the night."[83] In this example, Molly's sorrow over Rudy's death overwhelms her practicality and her desire to move on with life. Molly also reveals that, despite her insistence on moving on and overcoming grief, she and Bloom have not been the same since Rudy's death. For Molly, Stephen serves as a reminder of Rudy and of the past, as well as providing a link to the present. In contrast to the fragmented sentences that make up Bloom and Stephen's narratives, Molly's soliloquy ties all these fragments of memories and associations into giant

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[82] Ibid, 18:640.
[83] Ibid., 18:640.

sentences, creating a sense of extension and re-composition rather than breakdown.

Throughout *Ulysses*, Joyce portrays woman's body as the origins of both *Eros* and *Thanatos* in its ability to arouse sexual desire as well as to satisfy it. The feminine role is both to give birth to new life as well as to tend to and lay out the bodies of the dead. Molly's soliloquy furthers this association as it draws together the fragments of Bloom's and Stephen's narrative, releasing textual tensions but also recomposing these snippets of memories and associations into a new textual body. This act of narrative re-composition is associated with the erotic as Molly recalls past lovers and as the chapter builds towards a final orgasmic release when she recalls the moment when she agreed to marry Bloom. Molly remembers: "I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and ten he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad yes and yes I said yes I will Yes."[84] This ending to the novel succeeds in emulating sexual climax in part because of the innovative style in which it is written which submerges the reader in a moment of textual bliss. As Roland Barthes argues in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "[…] bliss may come only with the *absolutely new*, for only the new disturbs (weakness) consciousness," and further asserting, "[c]onfronting it, the New is bliss (Freud: 'In the adult, novelty always

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[84] Ibid.,18:644.

constitutes the condition for orgasm)."[85] Defying the rules of grammar, incorporating tabooed topics such as orgasm and menstruation, and employing stream of consciousness narrative, Joyce creates an entirely new experience of reading that captures for the reader this feeling of bliss. This ending is exceptional because, while it releases textual tensions and therefore represents a kind of death, the reader's desire for meaning or for ending does not end here. In fact, it is important to remember that Molly is remembering a moment of pleasure rather than experiencing it. Her memory of Bloom's proposal sends the reader back to the beginning, a moment that occurred before the text, and therefore represents a return to origins rather than a final resting place. This idea of ending and beginning coming together is further enhanced by the fact that *Ulysses* began with a son mourning for his mother and ends with a mother mourning for her son. Molly's mourning, unlike Stephen's, serves as a unifying force, creating continuity between life and death. In its realization of desire, this ending returns readers to the origins of the novel, and results in a sense of rejuvenation of novelistic possibilities rather than in some sense of terminus or absolute narrative closure.

IV.

Beginning with a sense of grief and loss, *Ulysses* is a novel concerned not only with the living but also with the dead. Joyce's attempts to forge a novel from

[85] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1975), 40-41. Originally published as *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

the fragments of various narrative structures and forms indicates his interest in forging a continuity between life and death and his faith in the ability of narrative to revive and regenerate. Ending the novel with both the death and rejuvenation of textual energies, Joyce returns to the pre-modern tradition of the Irish wake that featured not just mourning and lament but merry-making, games and amusements for the living, often involving match making and procreation.[86] Thus, Joyce's *Ulysses* contains many reversals and inversions, not simply of Catholic rituals but also of the plot of the novel that is time-bound and driven towards an understanding of death. In the themes of death and resurrection, Joyce evokes many pre-modern folklore narratives and the widespread theme of the "revival of the seemingly dead" which Ilana Harlow has observed throughout Irish folk tales and oral narratives.[87] According to Harlow, popular forms of oral narrative that feature tales of people who feign death for the purpose of a joke, as well certain wake customs that treat the corpse as if it were alive, reveal a deeper, pre-modern belief in the return of the dead.[88] These tales provide more than just another structure for Joyce's novel; rather they inform his conception of the novel form itself. This notion of revival and return finds further elaboration in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's final novel. *Finnegans Wake* takes its title and initial theme from the Irish American folksong which describes how Finnegan is brought back from death when a fight breaks out at his wake and whiskey is spilled on his coffin, a

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[86] Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1967), 159-60.
[87] Ilana Harlow, "Creating Situations: Practical Jokes and the Revival of the Dead in Irish Tradition. *The Journal of American Folklore,* 110 no. 436 (1997): 142, http://www.jstor.org/stable/541810.
[88] Ibid., 153.

revival of the "seemingly dead," similar to the oral folk narratives recorded by Harlow. Thus, in Joyce's figuration, the novelistic text is a corpse made up of dead meanings in need of re-invention. If reading is, as Peter Brooks argues, driven by the desire to know death, then Joyce's proliferation of words, his incorporation of many different languages, images, songs and rituals, ultimately denies the reader's desire for any definitive ending which bestows retrospective meaning on the text.

Joyce's goal in incorporating a variety of ways of dying — accident, illness and suicide — is not simply to show us that there are many ways of dying as life continues on in a linear stream towards the end. Rather, Joyce seeks to overcome the boundaries of the novel that fix meaning at the end, creating a text that is reborn with each new reading.[89] By fictionally inverting the rituals of the Catholic Church, Joyce is attempting to revive a shared meaning attached to death. For Joyce, narrative holds the possibility of salvation through its ability to subvert old meanings. Joyce's reinvention of the Irish novel and its previous associations with a dead tradition, has profound implications for the novelists writing in his wake. Blasting open the boundaries of the conventional novel form, Joyce offers a creative freedom to Irish novelists previously confined by conceptions of the past as dead or dying. Yet Joyce's attempts to overcome death

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[89] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939; New York: Penguin, 1976), 3, 628. Citations are to the Penguin edition. Again, this notion of a circular narrative becomes more refined and apparent in *Finnegans Wake* in which the novel's first sentence, "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious cicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs" is a fragment and forms the end of the last sentence of the novel which begins, "A way a lone aloved the long the."

by creating a text that highlights life’s continuity are not so easily repeated. As religious conceptions of heaven and the afterlife begin to fade, so too does the consolation they once offered. The four remaining authors in this study — Kate O’Brien, Samuel Beckett, John McGahern and Anne Enright — while undoubtedly influenced by Joyce’s reinvention of the Irish novel through death and rebirth, do not necessarily share his faith in the possibilities of narrative to restore and rejuvenate. These differences as well as their similarities, provide valuable insight into changing conceptions of death and dying in contemporary Irish literature and culture.

Chapter 2

The Eve of All Souls and the Death of Desire: Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room*

I.

Kate O'Brien's second novel, *The Ante-Room* (1934), is one of her most accomplished works. It is also her most sophisticated reflection on Irish conceptions of death, dying and the afterlife. Divided into sections that correspond with the three consecutive Catholic feast days commemorating the dead, the novel focuses on the dying Teresa Mulqueen and the effects her imminent death has on her adult children, Reggie, Marie-Rose and Agnes. As they face the reality of death, the children are forced to assess their lives and the futures revealed by this assessment seem bleak and constricted. Running parallel to this plot line is another that follows Agnes's moral conflict as she struggles to suppress her amorous feelings for Marie-Rose's husband, Vincent, while also attending to the needs of her dying mother. Agnes wants to remain loyal to her sister and is torn between a devout Catholic upbringing that values personal salvation and sacrifice for the good of the community and secular commitments to personal fulfillment and individual self-realization, which impel her to develop her relationship with Vincent. The novel's extended deathbed scene is focused on agonized emotions, so much so that action is curtailed, but O'Brien's omniscient narrative allows the reader access to Agnes's thoughts as well as to those of other more marginal characters such as Vincent and Marie-Rose. This technique allows for a nuanced and insightful portrayal of the beneficial aspects of Catholicism as well as offering a disturbing picture of the dangers resulting from its repression of human instincts and desires. While Agnes's and Vincent's resolution to sacrifice their happiness for each other for the good of their family suggests the necessity

and usefulness of Catholicism in keeping human desires in check, the ending of the novel implies something very different. In a novel suffused with a sense of anticipation for Teresa's death, Vincent's suicide defies readerly expectation and calls Catholic values into question. In her portrayal of death and dying, O'Brien suggests that while desire can be random and destructive, so too can Catholic repression and restraint. In *The Ante-Room* O'Brien offers a strong liberal Catholic critique of the restrictive aspects of Catholicism, arguing that the consolation it provides is little compensation for the ongoing suffering it causes.

O'Brien's attitude towards Catholicism is complicated, but some understanding of this conflicted relationship can provide valuable insight into her depictions of death and dying and her conception of literary narrative. Born in Limerick in 1897, Kate O'Brien was one of Ireland's most accomplished middle-class female novelists writing in the early twentieth century. Like Joyce, O'Brien was raised Catholic but later identified as an agnostic. She suffered the loss of her mother at an early age, at which point she was sent to a Catholic boarding school.[1] These early experiences shaped O'Brien's literary sensibility and may account for the melancholic tone to her fiction. Her biographer, Eibhear Walshe, has rightly identified this tone as "the melancholy of the lapsed Catholic at odds with the sexual codes of her religious education, yet still enraptured with the beauty of its ceremonies and its liturgy."[2] This sense of O'Brien as a lapsed Catholic who retains appreciation for the Church's rituals while also being critical of religion's

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[1] Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 118. Walshe notes: "Like Joyce, Kate appropriated much of her aesthetic of the novel to her Irish Catholic education."
[2] Ibid., 2.

stranglehold over Irish society is in many ways similar to Joyce's own feelings about the Church, and is later echoed by John McGahern in *The Barracks*. *The Ante-Room* evokes the familiar trope of the dying or dead mother so apparent in Joyce's *Ulysses,* but the crucial difference in these authors' fictional depictions of Catholicism in relation to death is that while O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* is permeated with nostalgia for a world that is fading away, Joyce's *Ulysses* is more concerned with rejuvenation and with the new life that arises out of death. O'Brien does not share Joyce's interest in Catholic theology. Rather, she is interested in Catholicism's social function and the spiritual dilemmas that emerge when this function becomes too closely allied with its religious purpose.[3]

In *The Ante-Room*, O'Brien's omniscient narration allows the reader access to Agnes's conflicted consciousness while also depicting her social reality, including the thoughts and desires of other characters. This narrative perspective offers a sympathetic view of the Catholic rituals that give life meaning while also showing, via dissident thought and interiority, the restraints that Catholic society can place on personal freedom. Thus, O'Brien does not condemn Catholicism as a wholly negative impediment to personal fulfillment, but she does suggest that the convergence of its social and religious functions results in an extremely repressive environment that stifles personal expression and isolates individuals. Another distinct feature of O'Brien's fiction is her portrayal of characters that are in some way sexually dissident. While *The Ante-Room* is not as controversial in its

[3] Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Books, 2000), 559. Kiberd notes: "[O'Brien] is unusual in her alertness to the spiritual dilemmas posed for conscientious young intellectuals by [Catholicism's] exacting claims."

depiction of sexuality as O'Brien's last published novel, *As Music and Splendor* (1958), which features a lesbian relationship, her interest in forbidden love and the religious and societal restrictions that limit these desires is clear in her depiction of Vincent and Agnes's relationship. The novel begins with Agnes attempting to forget or suppress her love for Vincent through prayer and confession. Although this initially appears to work, Vincent's admission that he loves Agnes proves too much for her and she confesses her own feeling for him. Teresa's impending death creates a tense atmosphere of expectancy at the family home, Roseholm.

In the narrative, death represents the end of human control and the experience of watching a loved one die provokes an outbreak of human impulses and desires. However, even as Vincent's and Agnes's feelings for each other threaten to overpower their self-control, they remain aware of the commitments that restrain them. What prevents them from fulfilling their sexual desire for one another is not simply their Catholic faith but the unhappy fact that Vincent is already married to Marie-Rose. Acting on their feelings would not only defy rules surrounding the Catholic sacrament of marriage but would also violate their familial bonds. Devout Catholics might view this as a tragic accident but would argue that the sacrifice of these characters' happiness is necessary for the greater good of the community. O'Brien takes a rather different view, suggesting that Agnes and Vincent's separation is harmful and wrong, and that the pain and suffering that is caused by their suppression of desire far outweighs the benefits of maintaining family loyalties and adhering to social conventions.

The Ante-Room is often identified as a distinctly Catholic novel, not because of its endorsement of religious belief but because of its sharp criticism of the restrictions imposed by orthodox Catholicism.[4] A distinctive feature of O'Brien's fiction is that it seems on the surface to endorse Catholic ritual and belief in its sympathetic portrayals of Catholic characters who find comfort and solace in their faith during difficult or morally-trying times. At the same time, O'Brien uses these instances of moral conflict to highlight and to critique the ways in which Irish society and religion were becoming too deeply entwined. *The Ante-Room* returns readers to the fictional village of Mellick, a setting familiar to readers of her first novel, *Without My Cloak*, and a place that strongly resembles the Limerick of O'Brien's own upbringing. Additionally, Teresa Mulqueen of *The Ante-Room* is a descendent of the Considine family whose fortunes were recounted in detail in *Without My Cloak*. While that novel depicted the rise of the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie, *The Ante-Room* describes its demise, elaborating on the earlier novel's underlying criticism of the oppressive nature of family bonds that limit imaginative and spiritual freedom. *The Ante-Room* is strongly elegiac in tone, a feeling that is enhanced by its being set in the eighteen eighties, giving it a retrospective quality and infusing it with a sense of a past that is dying or fading away. Declan Kiberd has described *The Ante-Room* as "a resigned and minimalist

[4] Eamon Maher, "Tracing the Imprint: Catholicism in some Twentieth Century Irish Fiction," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*,100:40 (Winter 2011): 491, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23209769. Maher calls *The Ante-Room* "the closest an Irish writer has come to being a truly 'Catholic' novel, not in the sense of indulging in apologetics or promulgating dogma but of being a narrative that could only be understood by readers with a certain knowledge of Catholicism and the obligations it imposes."

elegy:" He further argues that "[t]his is a world that is doomed to die even as it is revealed, and one which might be said never to have fully existed at all."[5] The novel's focus on Teresa's deathbed heightens this sense of a dying world, but Kiberd is right to point out that *The Ante-Room*'s pervasive melancholy can also be attributed to the failure of this world and its characters to have ever lived at all, this failure creating a sense of unfulfilled potential.

The feast days that structure the novel are times when the dead are celebrated and remembered and bring a pervasive sense of death into ordinary life for a period of three consecutive days. This merging of the worlds of the living and the dead is an important motif in the novel as the characters struggle to accept death. These characters are trapped in a purgatorial state as they await Teresa's death; an end that promises to relieve the strain of waiting and to offer a new beginning. The "ante-room" or waiting room of the novel's title serves as a metaphor for purgatory, suggesting that the characters are all in some way suspended and must remain trapped in suffering before they are released to either heaven or hell. As they strive to make sense of death, these characters find that the hope found in the promise of eternal life has the effect of easing the pain of death but also denies the reality of death's finality. While Catholicism seeks to regulate thoughts and action, keeping human desires in check, death threatens to break down this restrained order of things. O'Brien cleverly sets up the novel as being driven by the desire for Teresa's death, which will relieve the painful sense

[5] Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, 560.

of waiting, and then she maintains the reader's interest by complicating Teresa's progression towards death.

One of the first complications is that Teresa cannot die peacefully until she has ordered her life and family relations. It is clear from the first few pages of the novel that Teresa's greatest worry is the fate of her son Reggie, whose syphilis prevents him from marrying. This puts his future in jeopardy, making him solely reliant on his dying mother for love and support. This sense of ordering one's life before death is richly evocative of the Christian notion of achieving a "good death" so prevalent in the nineteenth century and which features prominently in deathbed narratives of that period.[6] However, this is no ordinary deathbed scene as Teresa's dying occupies the entire novel. *The Ante-Room* is a predominantly realist work and it is therefore of particular importance that O'Brien avoids describing Teresa's death and that the reader's last view of Teresa is presented through Agnes's eyes as she envies the look of happiness on her dying mother's face. The central conflict of the novel is not whether Teresa will live or die, but the struggle between *Eros,* which seeks to preserve life and to bind the

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[6] The nineteenth-century deathbed narrative was modeled on documents such as Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (London: R. Royston, 1651), http://gateway.proquest.com.eproxy.ucd.ie/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:45783:157. Taylor's book was an extension of the medieval manual on the art of dying well, known as the *ars moriendi*. Like the *ars moriendi*, Taylor argues for a controlled and tranquil death, achievable by following certain steps that require the dying person to set his or her house in order, heal family relationships, and to encourage religion in others. For more on the *ars moriendi* see also Nancy Lee Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: A Study in the Literary Tradition of the* Ars Moriendi *in England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) and Sister Mary Catherine O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942).

community together, and *Thanatos*, the death instinct, which seeks to dissolve the community and to substitute life for restful inertia. This tension is particularly apparent in the plot of the novel itself, which features the competing storylines of Teresa's death-plot and the love or marriage plot of Agnes and Vincent.

This central conflict of *The Ante-Room*, between love and death, is best understood through a closer examination of Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive and civilization's control of that destructive human impulse through guilt and punishment. In *Civilization and Its Discontents,* Freud argues that it is the struggle between these two contradictory impulses — one that seeks to preserve life, the other that seeks to return things to their primeval state of rest — that constitutes human life.[7] This tension manifests itself in the individual mind as a sense of guilt that creates a need for punishment. Civilizations then use this sense of guilt to establish laws and create punishments to keep human impulses in check.[8] However, as we see in the case of Vincent in *The Ante-Room*, when this sense of guilt increases in an individual without a corresponding feeling of connection or bond with the community, it can result in self-destruction. Religions, according to Freud, claim to "redeem mankind of this sense of guilt, which they call sin. From the manner in which, in Christianity, this redemption is achieved — by the sacrificial death of a single person, who in this manner takes upon himself a guilt that is common to everyone — we have been able to infer what the first occasion may have been on which this primal guilt, which was also

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[7] Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1989), 756-760.
[8] Ibid.,122.

the beginning of civilization, was acquired."[9] Importantly, Freud highlights religion's role in purging man of sin. In Catholicism, redemption is achieved through self-sacrifice and, in particular, through sacrificial death. This focus on sacrificial death further complicates the relationship between death and Catholicism. Christianity is at once supposed to control the human impulse towards death and destruction in order to promote feelings of love and unity, but it accomplishes this sense of community through the sacrificial death of one man.

Freud's theory is particularly helpful in understanding Vincent's suicide in *The Ante-Room*. Vincent's self-destructive impulse can be attributed to the overwhelming sense of guilt that comes from his need to suppress his love for Agnes. His Catholic faith is of little use in controlling this impulse and in fact the symbolism of Christ's sacrificial death becomes confused with his own destructive instincts. Vincent dies believing that he is sacrificing his life for the greater good of the community and under the illusion that his sin will be overlooked and that he will be delivered to heaven. In this instance, the guilt resulting from the repression of desire has not had the desired effect of warding off destructive human impulses but has, rather, directed these impulses to disastrous ends. Narrated from Vincent's perspective, O'Brien uses this last death scene to return readers to the source of man's primal guilt and the origins of the Catholic religion, at once highlighting the dangers inherent in Catholic dominance over society while also indicating a need to return religion to its symbolic function.

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[9] Ibid.,764.

Vincent's suicide brings together the novel's parallel plotlines and reverses their trajectory. Agnes's and Vincent's love, which should end in marriage, ends in death, while Teresa's illness which should end in death, ends inconclusively, with Teresa finding happiness in the news that Reggie is going to marry Nurse Cunningham. The sense of closure that Teresa's "good death" would have provided is undone by Vincent's death, which does little to resolve any of the novel's central conflicts. The novel's last lines — "[d]arling Mother. He pulled the trigger, his thoughts far off in boyhood" — establish Vincent's belief that he will be reunited with his mother in heaven.[10] These lines not only sound a false note, but are also, as Kiberd has noted, "melodramatic" and "richly sceptical."[11] Ending the novel in this way, O'Brien not only defies the expectations surrounding the fictional deathbed scene but also offers her strongest critique of Catholicism.[12] What is perhaps most revealing about the radical nature of this ending is the negative way it was received by critics and, indeed, the way O'Brien herself regarded it later in life.

O'Brien thought *The Ante-Room* to be the greatest of her novels, despite the fact that it was not as popular as *Without My Cloak.*[13] It is curious, then, to discover that she doubted the strength of its ending. According to Walshe, at the

[10] O'Brien, 221.
[11] Kiberd, 571.
[12] For more on novelistic death scenes see Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5-7, 11.
[13] Walshe, 58-59. For more on O'Brien's view of *The Ante-Room* as the greatest of her novels, see also Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, 557; John Jordan, "Kate O'Brien: A Note on her Themes," *The Bell*, 19 (January 1954): 55-9; Vivian Mercier, "Kate O'Brien," *Irish Writing*, 1, (1946): 86-100.

end of her writing career, O'Brien "wrote of [*The Ante-Room*] as an unappreciated work but her purest, strongest and best-formed, doubting, in hindsight, the wisdom of Vincent's suicide at the end, but still calling it 'a damn good example of a tragic novel.'"[14] O'Brien's own classification of *The Ante-Room* as a "tragic novel" highlights the subversive nature of the ending. The tragedy of the novel is not Teresa's death as she is happy and at peace, but is instead Vincent's suicide and Agnes's spiritual death and numbed resignation to her fate. These deaths call into question the Catholic privileging of communal over individual needs and underscore the disadvantages of this restrictive environment. O'Brien's feelings about *The Ante-Room* seem in many ways to contradict themselves as she calls it her "best-formed" work but she also seems to doubt the quality of her own design as she expresses reservations about the ending.[15]

Lorna Reynolds, author of *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, sees Vincent's suicide as the realization of "the tragic potential of the theme [of Catholic feeling at the level of individual consciousness]" but views such an ending as a "mistake."[16] Reynolds implies that this ending is a mistake because it suggests that Catholicism has such a strong hold that it can only be escaped through death. In a similar critique, Adele Dalsimer, argues that "[a]lthough his

[14] Ibid., 58.
[15] For a contemporary review of *The Ante-Room* see M.L., "Review of Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room*," *The Irish Book Lover* (Sept./Oct., 1934): 121. The reviewer notes: "A macabre setting for an illicit love, and perhaps most readers will feel that in real life death is too absorbing an affair to leave room for the terrors and ecstasies of such passion."
[16] Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Limited, 1987), 56.

death preserves Agnes for her family, Vincent's suicide is a weak ending to this powerful book. The final words should be Agnes's. She has made the righteous decision; everything she has known or been taught has led to it. And yet we see her choice of Marie-Rose above all else as we see her mother's love for Reggie and Vincent's passion for his dead mother: as a retreat from the future."[17] While Vincent's death may indeed "preserve" Agnes for her family, she is of little use to them now as O'Brien has just described her spiritual death. What makes this ending intriguing is the fact that it is not narrated from Agnes's point of view but offered from the perspective of Vincent, an eccentric outsider whose attempts to reconcile the Catholic focus on the community with secular self-fulfillment results in the dangerous delusion that suicide will return him to his mother in heaven. This ending may indeed represent a "retreat from the future" but it also serves as a warning for readers to avoid this tragic mistake. Without a loosening of Catholic restrictions in order to account for individual desires and human frailty, there can be no hope of a promising future.

The Ante-Room's ending leaves Teresa on the brink of death, her family still trapped in a state of waiting. Yet, Teresa has reached a kind of heaven on earth through the knowledge that Reggie's fate is settled. It is instead Agnes who must suffer as her loyalty to her family causes her to sacrifice her own dreams and desires. In her portrayal of Agnes's desire for death and description of Agnes as "dying" while other characters in the novel live, O'Brien portrays the loss of Agnes's soul as a fate worse than death, while the illusion of a Christian heaven

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[17] Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 32.

provides comfort and hope for her mother. Vincent's suicide — the last death in the novel — is the only one that is actually realized in the narrative time of *The Ante-Room*, making it the most important of all the deaths. The fact that it is a suicide calls into question Catholic values by highlighting the risk inherent in placing the attainment of heaven outside of mortal time, offering eternal life as a reward for a life well lived. In her refusal to provide her readers with the expected novelistic closure, O'Brien challenges them to re-examine the religious and social limitations that deny desire and endorse sacrifice and suffering. She suggests that while Catholicism can offer hope and consolation in the promise of heaven, it cannot control or tame death. Using death to expose the dangerous split between secular notions of individual self-fulfillment and Catholic control over human impulses, O'Brien calls for a change in Catholic attitudes towards sin to adapt to an increasingly secular modern society.

O'Brien's critique of Irish middle-class Catholic society is not only incisive but also ambivalent and, though her novel is set in the late nineteenth century, this critique can be applied equally to early-to mid-twentieth century as well. *The Ante-Room*'s portrayal of a society that has been stymied by its uneasy relationship to dogmatic Catholic ideology suggests that while these rigid rules may have been necessary to bind society together during one of the most turbulent historical changes in the nineteenth century, they now function as a kind of prison in an era of independence and modernization. O'Brien's characters find Catholic ideology so powerful in part because it has enabled the middle class's rise to power and social leadership, even as it now distorts or breaks the lives of these

characters. In essence, what O'Brien seems to be suggesting is that though strict adherence to Catholic ideology has been useful for the middle class as a collective, it has been harmful to the individual. Nevertheless, while O'Brien may be critical of the way that commitments to family and religious codes can smother individual needs and desires, her novel curiously repeats on a narrative level the wider middle-class impasse it diagnoses. In the novel Agnes and Vincent are the most transgressive characters in terms of their illicit love which is not only a religious sin but also poses a threat to bourgeois society as it endangers social and familial bonds. Yet, no matter how much they emotionally transgress or intellectually oppose the ideologies that oppress them, Agnes and Vincent ultimately conform to the things which they doubt or disbelieve. Agnes's last expressed wish in the novel is to die and Vincent's last action is to kill himself, an action that he frames in Catholic terms. In this way *The Ante-Room* portrays conformity as suicidal but fails to imagine or narratively conceive of any alternative. In the end, O'Brien's novel suggests that the conflict between Catholicism and secular modernity cannot be reconciled or resolved. The old world may be dying, but *The Ante-Room* offers no vision of a new world to come.

II.

The first of *The Ante-Room*'s three sections, "The Eve of All Saints," is named after a Catholic holiday of pagan origin that traditionally marks the end of the harvest. According to Irish folklore, it is a time when the boundary between life and death is thought to become permeable and the dead return to their

ancestral homes.[18] An awareness of the holiday's origins informs this section, which depicts the restrictive social environment at Roseholm as the Mulqueen family agonizes over Teresa's impending death. Contrasting Teresa's perception of reality with that of Agnes, O'Brien sets up a conflict between mortal and eternal time and between the inner and outer realities of the characters. What is particularly interesting is that these characters' inner and outer realities are both shaped by Catholicism in distinctly different ways. Thoughts of heaven provide solace for Agnes, who finds comfort in the structure that Catholicism gives to her life. The inner joy Agnes finds in her Catholic faith is contrasted with the way that Catholic restrictions dominate her outer reality, serving not only to keep her inner desires in check, but also restricting self-expression and stunting her actions. Death works to loosen these boundaries, triggering a return of dormant feelings and past longings. For Theresa, death awakens concerns over the future rather than a return of the past and rather than serving as a restrictive force the Catholic promise of heaven offers her an escape from earthly suffering.

The title of the section, "The Eve of All Saints," rather than the more common secular name, Halloween, indicates that this is a Catholic feast day. Even so, the residual elements of the day's pagan origins are apparent in the ghostly imagery, references to autumn light and to the return of "dead" thoughts and desires. O'Brien's naming of the section has the dual function of reminding the reader of the Catholic rituals and belief which structure the everyday lives of the characters as well as recalling Ireland's pagan past and the spiritual realm that lies

[18] E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge, 1957), 73, 277.

outside the bounds of mortal time. In her assessment of *The Ante-Room*'s structure, Heather Ingman has rightly noted that: "The feast-days are both inside time, being marked on the Church calendar, and outside, in that they focus believers' attention on the lives of those who have passed into a dimension beyond time."[19] Catholicism places eternity beyond the limit of human mortality, beyond time. The structuring of the novel around the Church calendar infuses the narrative with two levels of temporality; one inside of time and one outside of it. The occasion of the Eve of All Saints allows the dead to return to earth, thus placing those who have passed beyond time, but who have not yet entered heaven, into the lives of those still living. At the same time, the characters in the novel often seek to transcend the boundaries of time and their ordinary lives (signified by the ticking clock and church bells) through prayers, dreams and imaginings.

The opening lines of the novel make clear this concern with time and establish the fragility of the crepuscular world O'Brien is depicting. Thus the novel begins: "By eight o'clock the last day of October was about as well lighted as it would be."[20] The setting of the novel on the last day of October, just as dawn breaks with its "tenuous sunshine" and "an air that moved elegiacally and carried a shroud of mist," is suggestive of a world that, while still living, is slowly dying and fading away.[21] This sense of stillness, of time running out, contributes to the novel's somber mood and accurately depicts the oppressive social environment at Roseholm. While the thoughts of the various characters are disparate, the Church

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[19] Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender.* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 122.
[20] O'Brien, 7.
[21] Ibid.

bells summon them back to reality and are meant to bring them together by creating a shared sense of time. Yet there is a sense that these characters' lives have lost their meaning, that their desires are impossible to realize, their futures dim. In this environment reminders of time only serve to aggravate Teresa's suffering. Thinking of her mother's anguish, Agnes remembers: "Once, when every whisper in the house had seemed to aggravate her mother's suffering, she had suggested silencing that clock. But Teresa would not have it. 'When I can't hear it any more,' she said, 'I'll know I'm at the Judgment Seat.'"[22] The chiming clock proves agonizing as it reminds Teresa of the dwindling amount of time she has left on earth. At the same time, it reassures her as it reminds her of the world she is still a part of, and confirms that she is still alive. Teresa's conflicting emotions about the clock highlight the beneficial as well as the detrimental effects of Catholicism. While the restraints Catholicism imposes on human life can cause suffering, religious faith also has the power to alleviate this suffering with the promise of eternal life.

Unlike Teresa, who wholly believes in the Catholic promise of eternal life, Agnes questions its focus on suffering and sacrifice. In Agnes's mind, the physical world of reality is linked with suffering, as is apparent in her description of being awakened by the Mass bells. Agnes sleeps with the curtains open so that at eight o'clock "she was aware of movement and light," again suggesting that the clock serves not only as a mark of passing time, but also as a way of drawing the characters back to the movement and light of reality, of life, and away from the

[22] Ibid.

darkness of death.[23] For Agnes, the "bells and clocks and thin autumnal light" that wake her are not necessarily positive but are "calling her back to things she did not wish to face."[24] Presumably, the reality that Agnes does not want to face is her mother's death. The bells serve as both keepers of time and as a call to prayer; the clock and thin autumnal light are reminders of the season (autumn's melancholy associations with the coming of winter) and of the fleeting nature of human life. The tolling Mass bells also remind Agnes of her Catholic faith and her communal responsibilities, separating her dreams and desires from the world of everyday existence.

While the Mass bells remind Agnes of the reality she does not want to face, they serve to affirm Teresa's life and the devout Catholicism she represents. Teresa reflects: "So well did she know those sounds that often now, when in pain or in a morphia half-dream, she was uncertain whether she heard or only remembered them. But this morning, after a night which she must not let herself think about, there had suddenly been some real sleep and a lull. She was awake, and the pain was vague, hardly there at all, you might say."[25] Here, the Mass bells mean quite different things to Agnes and Teresa. They confirm Teresa's life while they signify, for Agnes, an end to dreams and an awakening to a reality that does not conform to her imagined vision of it. Teresa has a difficult time discerning the difference between the dreams induced by morphine and her own reality. Her proximity to death has caused this line to be blurred, whereas for Agnes, the two

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] O'Brien, 13-14.

remain incompatible. This also indicates the differences between their views of Catholicism; Teresa unthinkingly adheres to Catholic teachings whereas Agnes, though devout, questions the ability of Catholic rituals to control passion or to ease suffering.

O'Brien deliberately sets these two devoutly Catholic yet distinctly different views next to each other in order to highlight the division between the present — filled with anxiety and limitations — and the possibilities of the future. The setting of the Eve of All Saints offers a glimpse of that future possibility as it encourages a bridging of the divide between mortal existence and the promise of everlasting life in heaven. In *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination*, Frederick Hoffman notes: "One of the most important of all elements in the literary view of mortality is the time-space relationship that at any moment helps to define human nature. This relationship is indispensably associated with eternity and its effect upon the measurement or the sensing of time." [26] The Catholic sense of eternity includes but is not restricted to the eternity of the afterlife. A secular sense of time can be constricted to the life-span of the individual or stretched to encompass the longer life of the nation or even of the species. But religious (including Catholic) senses of time fold this into an even wider sense of time before the world (before creation) and an eternity, which is essentially a cancellation of time. On the Eve of All Saints this division of space is mended, temporarily freeing the characters from their obligations to the living and allowing them to mingle with the dead.

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[26] Frederick Hoffman, *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 3-4.

The effect of eternity on the sensing of time is particularly apparent in O'Brien's depiction of Teresa. As she lies in her sick bed, Teresa's prayers and thoughts of eternity are interrupted by her earthly concerns about her family, illustrating the conflict between mortal and eternal time. Despite any delirium brought on by her illness or medication, Teresa remains aware of the feast day and, when she inquires of Nurse Cunningham what feast it is, she is reminded that it is the thirty-first of October. The Nurse does not appear to recognize the significance of the date, but Teresa immediately identifies it as the Eve of All Saints. She begins her prayers: "She shut her eyes and let the brown beads slip through her worn-out fingers. First Glorious Mystery, the Resurrection. Our Father who art in Heaven — there had always been great fun in this house on the Eve of all Saints'."[27] The loosening of the beads around Teresa's fingers is suggestive of a slackening of Catholic restrictions, a weariness associated with its rituals. Teresa's prayers are interrupted by memories of the parties her family used to have on All Saints' Eve. But this memory too is spoiled as Teresa remembers that a specialist doctor is coming from Dublin the next day. The thought of the doctor's visit makes her anxious, as it reminds her of how her family — particularly Reggie — is unprepared to live life without her. In this instance, the fate of Teresa's soul is contingent on the ordering of her family's life. The only way that she can reconcile mortal and eternal time is by correlating her death with the fulfillment of her desire that Reggie find someone to care for him.

[27] O'Brien, 15.

A further breakdown of the boundaries separating past from present occurs when Agnes receives news that her sister, Marie-Rose, is arriving to Roseholm that day. Despite the fact that Marie-Rose's letter says that her husband, Vincent, will not accompany her, Agnes suspects that he will. Agnes is reminded of her infatuation with Vincent and begins to see his ghost everywhere: "She glanced at the place at her right hand, at the empty chair which he would fill — and saw him in it, more clearly than to-night she would allow herself to do."[28] Agnes sees Vincent more clearly in her imagination than she can in reality, where she is limited by the social and religious constraints that keep her from desiring her sister's husband. Vincent is not an actual ghost, but throughout the novel he is presented as a shadow of himself, as a living dead figure who represents the ghost of Agnes's suppressed desires. When Agnes thinks of the change in Vincent's personality that has occurred since he married Marie-Rose — he has changed from gay to sulky and intelligent to bored — she begins to feel sorry for him. She notes that he has transformed from "heavenly beautiful to mortally, so that time and pain could scar him."[29] Agnes's role as narrator is significant here as Vincent is presented from her point of view. The bounds and constraints of marriage have wounded Vincent, made him vulnerable and, most of all, made him mortal. Now he is subject to both the ravages of time and of pain.

Yet, Agnes's love has a redemptive quality as Vincent is transformed in her mind, allowing the old, god-like Vincent to return, albeit in spectral form. Her feelings for Vincent are so strong that she does not simply imagine him, but feels

[28] O'Brien, 27.
[29] Ibid., 28.

compelled to reach out and touch him. This scene echoes an earlier description as O'Brien writes how Agnes "stared at the empty chair and saw its ghost with pity, so that involuntarily her hand ran along the edge of the table as if to touch his lying there. Then, chilled with fear by such an odd impulsion, she drew it back and shivered."[30] This description of Agnes's behavior is indicative of the level of restraint in her daily life; her impulse to run her hand along the edge of the table frightens her. At the same time, her urge is to touch an imagined hand rather than an actual one, signifying the repressed desires that persist and find alternative outlets if the normal channels for acting out such impulses are blocked.

In an effort to banish her desire for Vincent, Agnes attempts to pray, hoping that confessing her sins will work to keep temptations at bay. She realizes that she has not gone to confession since she last saw Vincent three months ago. Despite the fact that Agnes knows that her profession of faith will help relieve her suffering, she is still reluctant to pray: "At Mass and in her prayers Agnes sought to face her moral problem — but kept ashamedly turning back from its categorical demands. 'I'm doing no harm to anyone, and I have nothing else of my own to think about.'"[31] It is clear from this example that Agnes's worldview is shaped by both Catholic ideology and a secular sense of personal fulfillment and has difficulty separating them from one another. It is also apparent that these two worldviews are not compatible and that one comes at the expense of the other. In the religious society Agnes lives in, she does not really have a choice between personal fulfillment and communal commitments; forsaking Catholicism would

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[30] Ibid., 28.
[31] Ibid., 29.

mean, for her, social death. Instead, she attempts to kill her feelings for Vincent through confession. It is during that confession that Catholicism's role in controlling human impulses becomes particularly apparent.

Sitting in the confession box, thinking of the impure thoughts about Vincent she must confess to the priest, Agnes warns herself not to be too dramatic: "Our absurdity must be more a wound to the Eternal, Agnes thought, than our guilt. To have sinned was only too nauseatingly ordinary; not to see that and to make a self-inflating drama of sin was not so ordinary, but more despicable."[32] Instead of sin being represented here as something terrible and extraordinary, it is described as "ordinary," mundane even. Sin, in other words, is an inevitable part of human existence. However, Agnes emphasizes the dangers of making a "self-inflating drama" of sin, thereby conflating the sin of impure thoughts with the sin of vanity. To treat sin too seriously is to elevate humanity since it is to suggest one might even become sinless. In contrast, to dismiss sin as trivial is to dismiss humanity too much, suggesting it has no value — a nihilism that finds its extreme in murder or suicide. In her confession Agnes feels trapped between these contradictory impulses of avoiding melodrama or nihilistic absurdity. In some sense, then, Agnes's dilemma can be connected to the style that O'Brien uses to portray it as *The Ante-Room* does not fit completely into the categories of either popular cultural melodrama or modernism.

Having listened to her confession, the priest tells Agnes that her love for Vincent will "die" as a result of prayer. He tells her: "That is in any case the fate

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[32] Ibid., 65.

of earthly love, my child. Whereas in the search for God, in the idea of God there is matter for eternity."[33]Here the priest privileges one world over the other. The spiritual world that exists outside of time is given priority over both the psychological realm of desires and the mortal realm dominated by physical needs. The function of Catholicism here is to impose order on society, an order that forces the fulfillment of dreams and desires outside of mortal time. The drama of Agnes's struggle between individual and communal needs, as well as between inner and outer realities, is self-contained in that, for the most of the novel, the dramatic battle of emotions is fought inside her head. Conversely, Teresa's struggle with death is fought on the public level and we are only occasionally given insight into her thoughts. O'Brien uses this contrast between Agnes and Teresa to highlight the ways in which even devout Catholics have been influenced by secular thought. In its attempts to control all aspects of social and religious life, the Catholic Church is at risk of losing its religious function and becoming associated solely with punishment and restriction.

O'Brien's desire to undo this association between religious and social functions is apparent in her narrative focus on the inner lives of her characters. The plot of *The Ante-Room* itself is driven by thought rather than action. While centered on the dying mother, the narrative does not so much describe Teresa's dying moments as focus on the lives of her children as lived in the shadow of their mother's death. Even the drama at this level is more interior than external. As they await their mother's death, the children deal with their conflicting emotions

[33] Ibid., 69.

not through dialogue, but through private observations. The focus on thoughts over action emphasizes the oppressive and pre-determined nature of these characters since we as readers come to accept that they will bring about no major changes in their lives. Agnes's thoughts in particular offer insight into her conflicted relationship with Catholicism. Early in the novel, Agnes notes that her "final fear was of words. When she was a schoolgirl once or twice she had had to accuse herself of vague curiosities and stirrings of her sensual imagination — matters which she had not understood, but which she knew to wear the looks of sins against the sixth commandment."[34] Even as a young girl Agnes felt guilty of impure thoughts, though she did not entirely understand why they are bad. It is significant that Agnes is afraid of words because they give shape to her thoughts. Speech and writing become associates of action. However, these forms of expression do not necessarily accurately convey meaning and there are conflicts throughout the novel between what is said and what is meant. There is a danger in words because they have the ability to provoke action and inflict suffering while at the same time they are often ambiguous in their meanings. O'Brien's narrative mediates between thought and action, between life and death, allowing for an accurate description of the moral and religious conflicts that define life and, in turn, shape conceptions of death.

The link between the eternal, spiritual world and earthly existence is maintained in Christianity through symbols such as the crucifix that is a reminder of Christ's suffering, the wine that represents his blood, and the bread that

[34] Ibid., 63.

represents his body.[35] These images serve as reminders of the sacrifices necessary to attain eternal life. The social environment depicted in *The Ante-Room* is so suffused with religious imagery that it permeates the consciousness of characters such as Agnes who turns to prayer to banish her feelings for Vincent and to rid her of her sense of selfhood. As she attends Mass before her confession, Agnes realizes that she must suppress what she most desires in order to live. This means ridding herself of her feelings for Vincent and, essentially, her own sense of self. As she sits through the Benediction she thinks: "She was not herself. She was, much more fortunately, part of a formula. What was required of her was to be accurate in moving with that formula."[36] The thought that she is *not* herself does not frighten Agnes but comforts her. Despite having her own dreams and desires, Agnes is much more comfortable living according to a formula dictated by her family and the Catholic church, than she is attending to her own needs. While Agnes wants to conform to society's expectations of her, her emotions get in the way, compelling her to do things that she should not do.

Agnes makes a distinction between feelings, linked with her inner thoughts, and rational knowledge provided by the external world. As she struggles to overcome her feelings for Vincent, she makes a distinction between rational knowledge and felt emotion. Agnes expresses frustration with her own emotions, contending: "She only wanted to know this — that God blessed her. Not to feel it. Feelings, amorphous things, pressed on each other, merged, disturbed — were of

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[35] For a Kristevian reading of *The Ante-Room* see Heather Ingman, "The Feminine and the Sacred," in *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 115-141.
[36] O'Brien, 65.

their very nature stained by human life."[37] By describing these ever-shifting emotions as somehow soiled by human life, Agnes suggests that intentions are contaminated by action. Knowledge, then, is an untainted spiritual thing, rather than something attained through experience. Paradoxically, Agnes consistently puts her trust in emotions over rationality, in bodily experience over celestial wisdom. Despite her desire simply to know that God blesses her, she seeks proof of it in life and in experience.

In particular, Agnes focuses on her own memories to bring her knowledge, clarity, or to redeem the present. When she returns from confession, she finds that Vincent has indeed accompanied Marie-Rose to Roseholm. At the dinner table, Agnes witnesses Vincent's "mood of radiance" with "a hint of madness in it" that she interprets as unhappiness in his marriage, and thinks that it must be a "test of heaven" that he is treating her so kindly.[38] Vincent's kindness towards her reminds Agnes of the feelings she has repressed in order to live according to the rules of society and of the Church. After some thought, Agnes decides: "even Heaven, it seemed, could not quite do that, could not quite bring back the demigod of that far time. Her memory was a better re-creator, and this charmer who was carrying off his part so well was no more than a tired, unhappy man, impelled to give a superb impersonation of the dead."[39] Here, even heaven cannot quite summon the image of Vincent that Agnes holds in her mind, suggesting that her own desires are in some ways stronger than her faith.

[37] Ibid., 66.
[38] Ibid., 91.
[39] Ibid., 32.

Agnes describes Vincent's "superb impersonation of the dead," suggesting that the person he was to her, the person she fell in love with, has died, and that any feelings she has for him are linked with death and with the past. Yet, despite her attempts to overcome the temptation that heaven has supposedly set before her, Agnes cannot banish her feelings for Vincent. There is a sense here that human emotions have overpowered religious control. The image of Vincent as an impersonator of the dead resonates deeply with the end of the novel when he takes his own life. There is an inverse logic in Agnes's description — Vincent's old self, the one that has been killed through his marriage to Marie-Rose — arises in Agnes's memory as a "ghost" that he must impersonate in order to live. Living here is equated with assuming the identity of the dead. In order to truly "live" in this social reality without being a fake or imposter, Vincent's own desires must die.

The repression or denial of emotions or of the past in *The Ante-Room* is linked with the death not of the body, but of the soul. Although the novel is organized around a dying body — that of Teresa Mulqueen — the predominant narrative focuses not on the breakdown of the body but on the death of the souls whose bodies are still living (namely Agnes and Vincent). The Eve of All Saints section brings together characters that are trapped in a kind of purgatory between life and death. As the evening comes to an end it becomes clear that while Catholicism offers some hope for resolving the conflicts between body and soul by limiting and restricting desires, it does not solve the problem of desire itself, which persists even when repressed. This first section, the longest of all three

sections of the novel, highlights the tensions of religious and secular worldviews, weighing the pros and cons of Catholic belief. The benefits are made clear in the narrative of Dr. Curran, Teresa's doctor, as he observes the Mulqueen family's devotion.

As a "hereditary Catholic" Curran only takes prayer as a "matter of human impulse."[40] He reflects: "The pros and cons of religion never stayed his thought, life as he found it being the field of his concern. And in that field it seemed to him that the Catholic Church provided as good a system as might be found for keeping the human animal in order — a necessity which he emphatically accepted. A good system, because through thick and thin, it exacted a soul of every man and instilled in the very lowest of its creatures an innocent familiarity with things not apprehended of the flesh."[41] This quotation reveals the novel's central value system in which Catholicism is used to regulate human impulses and desires. What is particularly striking is Curran's view of a soul as something that is created by religion rather than vice versa. Religion here, forces or compels a soul into existence. Curran's description again calls to mind Freud's claim that Christianity is useful in keeping human desires in check by offering redemption from the sense of guilt created by the contradictory desires of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. O'Brien sees this as one of the benefits of religion but is also skeptical of this rather callous view as it closely aligns Catholicism's religious function with its social one, ignoring its spiritual benefits and highlighting its power to punish and restrict. For Dr. Curran, humans are simply animals, bundles of impulses and

[40] Ibid., 53.
[41] Ibid.

instincts, which must be controlled and suppressed externally by the Church. O'Brien contrasts this view with her portrayal of Agnes's thoughts as well as her actions. She depicts Agnes not as an animal controlled by her impulses but as a rational being whose judgments do not simply adhere to the dictates of the Church; rather they are based on her own sense of familial responsibility and her ability to think independently. Death, as that which cannot be explained or fully apprehended by science, lies in the realm of religion, and is at once the limit of the Church's regulation and also its final goal. As the dead return on the Eve of All Saints, so too do all the impulses and desires Catholicism attempts to keep at bay. In this section, prayers and confessions are offered in vain as the overwhelming powers of human impulse and emotion threaten to overcome the narrative, illustrating the weakness in the Church's domination over these compulsions as well as the futility of its attempts to control death.

III.

The feast day that lends its name to the novel's second section, "The Feast of All Saints" is notable because it marks the beginning of winter according to the ancient Celtic calendar, as well as the Catholic feast of celebration for the souls that have reached heaven.[42] Again, O'Brien skillfully combines both the Catholic and pagan meanings of the feast day, using them to inform the mood of the chapter and to lend added significance to its events. This section is characterized

[42] See Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 78-79.

by an increasing sense of approaching death, as dying is extended to include not only Teresa Mulqueen but also the landscape, which is described as cold, freezing and icy, descriptions consistent with the approach of winter. There is also a strong sense of sacrifice and martyrdom, reinforcing the feast day's association with the Catholic celebration of all the saints and martyrs who have died for the sins of mankind. Although Teresa's unwavering faith in God and her endurance of physical pain cast her as a saint or martyr-figure from the beginning of the novel, it is Agnes who becomes the true martyr in the end, as she must sacrifice her own happiness for her faith and for the good of her family. Contrary to Dr. Curran's view, O'Brien's portrayal of Agnes implies that Catholicism does not simply keep human desires in check but gives human life a higher purpose and meaning.

"The Feast of All Saints'" begins with Teresa's dressing room being transformed into the sanctuary of a chapel where the mystery of the transubstantiation will occur. According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, during the Mass bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. This notion of transubstantiation, or of sacrifice being made real, is important to this section of the novel in which fantasy is actualized and which is suffused with a sense of sacrifice and of suffering. The power of O'Brien's omniscient narrative is apparent in the description of the Mass scene, which is presented not from the point of view of a specific character, but offers a more objective vision: "After the Offertory, the room, the chapel, became profoundly quiet. A stillness which seemed of vast but undefined significance and as if exacted by some unknown, external will, which unified while it subjugated this assemblage of isolated

hearts."[43] The power of Catholic ritual to unify and console is particularly apparent in this passage in which human life is given a distinct, if unknown, meaning and the isolated hearts of those in the room are brought together. Despite the advantages apparent in the uniting power of ritual, the negative aspects of Catholicism are present here in the word "subjugate," implying that the ritual is not only bringing the characters together but also conquering or defeating their individual wills. The failure of religious ritual to sustain its power and vanquish individual human suffering is apparent in Teresa's physical pain and she is described as being "disappointed that she should be in pain through this blessed Mass in her room, and now when Our Lord Himself was in her heart. If only she could pray, if only she could pray properly!"[44] Ritual in this example is reduced to a formula that, even when followed exactly, cannot aid individual needs. Teresa cannot pray properly, not only because of her physical pain, but also because her concerns over Reggie's fate distract her from fully surrendering herself to prayer.

By contrasting Teresa's deathbed prayers for Reggie's happiness with Agnes's longings for Vincent, O'Brien calls into question the power that religious faith or prayer has to shape human actions and to change or impact social reality. In this section in particular, dreams appear to come true, but there is an underlying sense that reality can never match imagination. Vincent and Agnes finally express their feelings for each other verbally, even if they remain unable to be together. Vincent tells Agnes: "'When I'm in Dublin, I manage most of the time to live a fantasy life,' he said, 'but here, when I see you, how real you are, with activities

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[43] O'Brien, 128.
[44] Ibid., 130.

and plans that have nothing to do with me — that goes. And then there is nothing.'"[45] Vincent's fantasy of Agnes has been destroyed by the reality of her appearance in front of him and yet she is still unattainable, resulting in a situation in which he is neither able to live in fantasy or reality.

In a similar way, Agnes thinks of the delusions and fantasies that make life bearable. She thinks how Marie-Rose hates realities and Vincent lives a fantasy life; her father maintains his cheerfulness in the face of his wife's death, and her mother's morphia-induced dreams keep her from despair, but Agnes questions what her own delusions might be. She wonders: "[W]as her present foolery the pharisaical one that she had, by one confession, one repentance, killed desire?"[46] Here Agnes's doubts about her faith are revealed as she acknowledges that confession cannot kill desire. In this recognition of her own delusion, Agnes is facing the reality that Catholicism does not have the power to relieve her of her problems. She thinks of Vincent's reference to a fantasy life and of how she knows what he means: "He thought it was an escape, apparently, but it had been her prison. To her it had lately seemed, in its sweetness, its uncertainty, its truthfulness, to be taking on the very bulk and texture of reality. It had made fantasy of every day and what she saw and touched."[47] It is important here that Agnes thinks of the fantasy life not as an escape but as a prison as it has begun to solidify into reality, trapping her in an impossible situation. This dangerous conflation of fantasy and reality has transformed Agnes's world irrevocably and

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[45] Ibid., 132-33.
[46] Ibid., 141.
[47] Ibid., 141-142.

she realizes that she cannot go back to living as she did before, her life dictated by the Church and by her family. At the same time, she realizes that she cannot escape these constraints.

When Vincent and Marie-Rose have a disagreement, Agnes is left to comfort her sister. As she listens to Marie-Rose, Agnes feels guilty about her own feelings for Vincent. She remembers what the priest told her at confession and compares human love with divine love. Agnes thinks: "How sordid a private love became, and how extremely embarrassing! '…whereas in the idea of God there is matter for eternity.' Yes, holy Jesuit, that's all very fine. But we aren't made in the most convenient form in which to pursue ideas, and we have no notion at all of how to front eternity."[48] This quotation reveals the heart of Agnes's dilemma; she wants to live according to the Church's teachings but finds that her human instincts and desires threaten to overwhelm her good intentions and lead her astray. In this example, Agnes highlights the way that the messy and complicated aspects of human life interfere with the mystery of eternity. The Catholic Church, as O'Brien depicts it, makes little allowance for human weakness and fails to take into account the difficulties inherent in the human condition. Agnes's inner questioning of the Jesuit and his suggestion that she cure the basic human problems of lust and desire by thinking of God, reveals the absurdity of such a suggestion. Through her portrayal of Agnes, O'Brien highlights the rift between Catholic doctrines and the reality of trying to live by them.

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[48] Ibid., 147.

Agnes's moral conflict is heightened by her mother's final illness. She must witness the deterioration of Teresa's bodily form, with little knowledge of what will happen to her soul. As she makes her daily visit to her mother's deathbed, Agnes imagines her mother's corpse:

> In this light, which was no light at all but only an irregular lifting here and there of darkness, Teresa seemed a stranger […] A corpse, a shadow of a corpse, breathing in heaviness and fear, a corpse made dreadful to the senses, groaning in its half-dream, half-pang — a corpse, unrecognizable were it not for the little sobbing familiar man who knelt beside it, and whose woe identified its story.[49]

Teresa is identified here as a corpse, identifiable not by her features and characteristics but rather, by her husband, who is grieving for her. As the Mulqueen family grapples with the certainty of Teresa's death, envisioning her mother's body as a corpse allows Agnes to disassociate herself from death and from the sorrow that it brings. The corpse is not here an aesthetic object or blank slate upon which to project fantasies and desires. This is a body "made dreadful to the senses" because it is caught between life and death, between dreams and the pain and reality of illness. Agnes is relieving some of her own pain by imagining her mother as someone else, a stranger. As her mother approaches death, Agnes must project herself into the future, imagining her father's grief. It is this grief that distinguishes her mother's corpse from any other corpse. Death has the transformative ability to turn a loved one into a stranger, enhancing the mystery surrounding Catholic conceptions of eternity. At the same time, Agnes finds a

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[49] Ibid., 166.

certain relief by envisioning her mother as a corpse as it alleviates the pain of waiting for her mother's death.

This sense of waiting for a death that will alleviate the tension between dreams and reality permeates the atmosphere of the novel and the end of this section, "The Feast of All Saints," sees a culmination of textual energies as the time of Teresa's death approaches. O'Brien's narrative shifts away from Agnes as Vincent's mental state begins to unravel, in part due to his doomed feelings for Agnes. He thinks to himself: "To-day is an ante-room,' you said. Admit your meaning. Or are you trapped now by the inexorability of time? What was your meaning then?"[50] Here, Vincent's conception of time as unyielding, unalterable, conflicts with Catholic notions of redemption for sin. There is a sense that he is waiting for an inevitable end rather than a new beginning. Interestingly, the comment about the day being an ante-room is one that Vincent made in front of Agnes, Marie-Rose, and Dr. Curran, among others. Yet no one questioned what he meant. Rather, Vincent must question himself to establish his own meaning. He answers his own question: "An ante-room — well, perhaps to truth, to fate, or any of these useful abstracts. And she was all of them, entangled in their moonshine, making both sense and nonsense of their echoes."[51] Vincent has lost sight of eternity, become disillusioned with atonement, impatient with waiting for his life to begin. The ante-room does not lead to reality but, rather, plunges Vincent further into abstraction. In Vincent's mind, Agnes is tangled in this

[50] Ibid., 173.
[51] Ibid.

unreality, between the truth of emotion and that of reality. His love for her makes sense in his heart but is nonsense to the everyday world.

Just prior to his thoughts about the day being an ante-room, Vincent was thinking about Teresa's imminent death. He thinks of her death as a "savagery which it seemed no Christian could help to keep her living — but the eternal Church, making so little of the visible woe to the flesh, and so much of the soul's elected stay within that woe, did ring a harsh peal which the imagination answered. The horrible death-bed had its point then, would he say?"[52] Vincent is criticizing the Church's valuation of the soul above the flesh and yet he praises the power of the religious imagination to overcome pain and agony. The point of the deathbed is supposedly to illustrate one of the precepts of Christianity: for the soul to transcend the human flesh and thereby achieve immortality. What is particularly interesting about Vincent's understanding of the deathbed is that in his configuration the imagination has more power than Christian faith. Christian rituals cannot tame death, but the pain of dying can provoke the human mind to dream and imagine.

The deathbed scene is a significant aspect of the nineteenth-century novel and repeatedly functions, as Peter Brooks has noted, as " a key moment of summing-up and transmission."[53] The idea of death as a culmination of life endows the death moment with a retrospective quality. Yet this summing up is also performed in anticipation of an ending that will allow the story to become transmissible. Teresa's deathbed scene essentially occupies the entirety of *The*

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[52]Ibid., 172-173.
[53] Brooks, 95.

Ante-Room, and does not function as a summing up of her own life but works to reveal Agnes's moral conflicts. O'Brien is using the deathbed scene to force the characters to consider the future rather than to order the past. As Vincent's narrative indicates, Christianity provides little relief from deathbed suffering and instead stresses the importance of pain as a reminder of the sacrifice necessary to attain eternal life.

The section, "The Feast of All Saints'" ends with the relief of Teresa's worries about Reggie's fate as Nurse Cunningham has agreed to marry him, but this resolution fails to quell the reader's increasing anxiety as Agnes and Vincent's situation intensifies. As he waits for Agnes to meet him, Vincent thinks: "Midnight was striking in the town. A jumble of the reminder — there were so many spires — but at last it was no longer midnight. It was All Saints' Day, he thought irrelevantly. And as he savoured again the quiet which the subsided clocks enhanced, he heard footsteps coming from the east, from beyond the fir trees."[54] The chiming of the clock is both a torture and a relief for Vincent. Midnight marks the hour that Agnes will come to him, but it is also a reminder of various constraints. The chiming bells are from church spires, reminding Vincent of the communal and religious commitments that prevent him from being with Agnes. The bells also signal the end of All Saints' Day — a time to celebrate those who have reached heaven — and the beginning of The Feast of All Souls — a time to remember the souls that remain in purgatory. There is an ominous sense

[54] O'Brien, 173.

that the tolling of the bells indicates that Vincent must abandon hope of heaven and join those in purgatory.

This purgatorial sense of being trapped between worlds is further developed when the narrative shifts to Agnes's perspective. On her way to meet Vincent, Agnes approaches the threshold of the house and hesitates. She notices: "The bells and clocks of Mellick were withdrawing one by one from their discussion of midnight. The stars were clear. The freezing air had danger in it."[55] Like Vincent, Agnes is hyper-aware of the chiming bells that mark midnight, but it is significant to note that it is not only Church bells that Agnes notices but also the secular clocks of Mellick, signifying the degree to which Agnes is caught between religious and secular worlds. That the clocks and bells are discussing midnight indicates a conflict between these two different conceptions of time. As the tolling bells and clocks subside, Agnes is left in silence, suggesting that time has been paused. She is under the clarity of the stars, linking this in-between world she is about to enter with the celestial and with heaven. However, the freezing air has danger in it, suggesting that her meeting with Vincent cannot end well. The section concludes not only with a sense of foreboding but also with a sense of death — the freezing air can pause time but it cannot sustain life. The deathbed setting of the novel reveals the limits of human existence, provoking a need for self-fulfillment and the realization of desire, making it possible for Vincent and Agnes to conceive of a future for their love. However, the prospect of death also works to reveal the religious and social constraints that limit these

[55] Ibid., 177.

desires and work as reminders of the sacrifices necessary to attain heaven. On the brink of a dying world, these characters are burdened with a sense of guilt and are unable to realize their desires, bringing to the fore the destructive death instinct that promises the release from the torment of desire and the end of human suffering.

IV.

"The Feast of All Souls" marks the last episode of the novel and is also the feast day on which those who have failed to attain the beatific vision of heaven are remembered. These souls have not yet been cleansed of their mortal sins and must rely on the prayers of others to save them. In spite of their Catholic devotion, the characters in *The Ante-Room* all fit this description of souls who have not yet attained heaven. Teresa's death is the novel's anticipated end but we are never given a description of her final moments, nor is the narrative clear in stating that her death has taken place. Instead, her death is overshadowed by Vincent's suicide. Rather than ending the novel with a point of closure — the death of Teresa — O'Brien's narrative ends with a disorienting, fragmenting ending that not only leaves the characters' futures in jeopardy but calls into question Catholic beliefs and attitudes towards suicide. By ending the novel in this way, O'Brien leaves her readers dissatisfied, forcing them to reconsider the Catholic Church's control over social, religious, and spiritual life and its attempted monopoly over death and the afterlife.

At the beginning of this section the reader is presented with a hauntingly beautiful image of Vincent and Agnes's first and final embrace. There is a sense that time has been stopped, the surrounding world muted, in order for them to be together for a brief moment. O'Brien describes how: "[l]ine for line, bone for bone, they seemed to fit together as if by heaven grooved to take each other, as if the platonic split was mended here, and a completed creature stood united to itself at last."[56] This image of unity presents Vincent's and Agnes's love as not only true and natural, but also heavenly. Any sense of divided worlds or split bodies is mended or redeemed in their embrace. The use of "seems" and the qualifying, "as if" creates a suggestion that this appearance is an effect of heightened emotion rather than something that has actually occurred. This description enhances the reader's sense of injustice that these characters cannot be together. It also offers a criticism, not simply of religion, but of society. Heaven has fit these lovers together; it is the world that has divided them.

Agnes's love for Vincent is associated with heaven and the celestial but it cannot be reconciled with her daily existence, no matter how pious or holy. When her mother's condition grows worse, Agnes is returned to reality and reminded that to continue her life she must sacrifice her love for Vincent. Agnes thinks of the "idiotic unrealities" she has dreamt of with Vincent.[57] She notes that these feelings "cannot be trusted to keep their character, but from hour to hour assume and abdicate a senseless power!"[58] The fantasy life Vincent represents is unstable

[56] Ibid., 178.
[57] Ibid., 203.
[58] Ibid.

and unpredictable, growing more powerful as it gains strength. Her love for her dying mother is the antithesis of Agnes's love for Vincent, working to return her to reality. Agnes remarks on this discontinuity in her life: "Meantime there was this family reality of her mother's ending life; contemplating that grey fact in her uncle's eyes, in Reggie's and her sister's. Agnes felt almost relieved that there was something that did not recede from her, something that defied her relativity."[59] Death here not only represents reality and reminds Agnes of the stability provided by familial love, but it also represents something concrete and final. In this sense, Agnes's conception of death is secular as she finds relief in its clarity and finality. Whereas heaven and eternity are contingent on devotion and belief, death is inevitable, a fixed endpoint.

As Teresa's death approaches, there is an increasing urgency for her to find peace before she dies. Nurse Cunningham observes Teresa's body: "She looked like the corpse of someone who had been overmuch beaten and driven to this belated peace. But even the nurse knew that life was still rampant there — and even happy."[60] The dying and battered body of Teresa Mulqueen is contrasted with her living and happy soul. As Agnes bends over her dying mother she is startled by the expression of happiness of Teresa's face: "This is happiness, she thought, and wondered if even here she did not grudge it."[61] Teresa's dying body — yellowed and grotesque — is not the focus here. Rather, her happiness overwhelms her features and she approaches the end of her life looking more

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 207.
[61] Ibid., 217.

alive than dead. It is Teresa's earthly desires — happiness and marriage for her son — that she finds fulfillment. Although there is a sense that Teresa has achieved some kind of earthly heaven even before her actual death, the reader remains aware that Nurse Cunningham is only marrying Reggie for his fortune and that Reggie's disease will eventually end in madness. Thus, O'Brien presents Teresa's belief that she has reached heaven as a kind of delusion, again highlighting the disparity between the consolation provided by Catholicism and the reality of death.

As Agnes realizes the happiness that the news of Reggie's engagement has brought her mother, her thoughts turn to her own fate. Agnes thinks: "They are all alive, even Mother. But I'm dying. Vincent, if only I could die — oh Vincent, darling…"[62] This is the last time that Agnes appears in the novel. The quotation ends with a plea, almost a lament for Vincent. Although Agnes has no way of knowing that Vincent is about to take his own life, she professes an urge to die herself. Thus, the novel ends with Teresa dying, yet happy, believing that God is good and has never failed her. Agnes chooses to sacrifice her own happiness in order to maintain her faith and to uphold her loyalty to her family. This choice results in a kind of liberal-secular death as Agnes is left with no future or way of achieving personal fulfillment. Finally, there is Vincent's suicide, which is a destruction of self, a sin against the Church as well as against his wife and family. The novel ends in a stalemate as neither religious nor liberal-secular worldviews have triumphed and both have resulted in death. O'Brien's failure to endorse

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[62] Ibid., 218.

either worldview suggests that she is advocating for a freeing of Catholic restrictions rather than embracing a purely secular society.

Vincent's suicide is striking because it is rational, planned and most importantly, he does not see the act as a mortal sin but believes that he will be reunited with his mother in heaven. Suicide goes against all Catholic teaching that condemns it as a selfish and therefore sinful act. Yet Vincent views his self-destruction as the supreme sacrifice, an act of martyrdom, to save Agnes and her family from suffering. While Vincent is rationally aware that he is committing a sin, he sees it as a venial sin that is easily forgiven. He believes that he is going to heaven, where he will "find [his mother] soon —in spite of the sin he was going to commit. Yes, it was a sin — but would God show him an alternative? To end things in one crime or live in an unending vulgar guilt?"[63] Vincent has thought about what he is going to do, recognizes that it is a sin, but sees no alternative. The sense of guilt he feels does not guard against his destructive impulse but fosters it. Death is a solution to Vincent's problems, the only way of bridging the gap between his love for Agnes — associated with the heavenly and the eternal — and the reality that prevents them from being together.

Vincent's choice of suicide represents a dangerous collusion of religious and secular worldviews that results in his belief that he can realize his desires by sacrificing his own life. Vincent's fantasy of Agnes has collided with his reality—tempting him with the possibility of achieving happiness and fulfillment in his lifetime. However, Catholicism asserts that living out this fantasy would be a sin,

[63] Ibid., 220.

forcing him to sacrifice that possibility. While in liberal-secular terms suicide would be the ultimate failure — a destruction of the self — Vincent is able to justify his action by viewing it as the ultimate sacrifice for the greater good of the community. Here, the guilt stemming from the tension between *Eros* and the death drive does not work to promote life but proves overpowering for the individual. This overwhelming sense of guilt can be attributed to the fusion of Catholic morality with social constraints that combine to devastating effect, making life impossible and leaving death as the only option. Perhaps most importantly of all, Vincent ends the novel believing that he will be reunited with his mother, suggesting a return to origins and to the primeval state that Freud describes as the end of the death instinct.[64] This ending not only defies the reader's expectations but also fails to provide a sense of resolution or closure. Vincent's suicide raises more questions than it answers. The future of the other characters, such as Agnes and Marie-Rose, whose lives will be unmistakably altered by this death, are left unexplained. In this sense, the narrative does not end, although the narrative time of the novel is over as the reader has reached the final pages. In the concluding sentence of the novel, Vincent's thoughts return to boyhood, indicating an emotional regression. Rather than ending in a culmination and release of textual energies, the plot of the narrative loses all sense of forward motion and bends back to the past, leaving the reader dissatisfied and with a sense

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[64] See Freud, 754. Freud summarizes his own argument in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "Starting from speculations on the beginning of life and from biological parallels, I drew the conclusion that, besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it to even larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and bring them back to their primaeval state. That is to say, as well as Eros there as an instinct of death."

that all this struggle has been futile. O'Brien uses death in *The Ante-Room* to highlight the dangers inherent in the complete repression of desire and to advocate for a more liberal Catholicism that allows for human weakness and incorporates secular ideas of self-fulfillment.

V.

Structured around the three consecutive Catholic feast days commemorating the dead, Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* is a novel concerned with the boundaries and divisions between life and death and between mortal and eternal time. Writing in the style of a popular romance novel, O'Brien combines death and marriage plots to highlight the tensions between *Eros* and the death instinct that constitute human life. This tension between life and death is further complicated by the conflicting Catholic and secular worldviews that influence these characters' sense of morality and manifests itself in a sense of guilt. While this guilt is useful in keeping human impulses in check, it threatens to overwhelm the individual who has no way of expressing or fulfilling his own needs and desires. The plot of *The Ante-Room* is initially compelled by the reader's desire for Teresa's death that offers the hope of a conclusive ending. This desire is further complicated by a related, though conflicting, desire for Vincent and Agnes to realize their love. The ending of the novel ultimately thwarts both these readerly desires by reversing these two plots. Teresa remains alive at the end of the novel and it is Vincent who dies.

This reversal reveals the unconventional way that O'Brien is employing

the form of the popular romance to critique Catholicism and its focus on guilt and restriction, sacrifice and suffering. Vincent's suicide in the final pages of the novel works as a fragmenting and dividing force, which illustrates the problems associated with Catholic control over both religious and social life in Ireland. When Catholicism functions mostly as a social force intent on controlling human impulses and desires, it puts the religious power of hope and consolation at risk. The yoking together of these two functions results in an overly restrictive environment that attempts control over body and mind, mortal time as well as eternal. The ending of the novel, which leaves the characters with little hope for the future, also calls into question liberal secular worldviews which privilege the fulfillment of self within mortal time. In her refusal to endorse either view, O'Brien highlights the benefits of Catholic consolation and the meaning and structure it gives to human existence, while at the same time arguing for a more liberal version of Catholicism that is more sympathetic to human failings. Thus, the author uses death and dying to force a re-examination of the social function of Catholicism and to question how closely this is allied with its religious purpose.

This need to examine the social function of religion in keeping human desires in check and particularly in regulating the transition between life and death finds further elaboration in Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*. Beckett's novel, like O'Brien's, ends with its character's future uncertain but whereas O'Brien argues for a humane relaxation of Catholic restrictions, Beckett experiments with what happens when religious structures are removed entirely. In *The Ante-Room* the imminent death of Teresa Mulqueen arouses conflicting impulses within her

children who seek to fulfill their own earthly desires but also feel constrained by their Catholic faith and familial bonds. These contradictory impulses cannot be made to cohere, resulting in death. What is most interesting about the ending of O'Brien's novel is that death, for both Agnes and Vincent is a choice. While Agnes sacrifices her soul and individual desires in order to live, Vincent sacrifices his life in order to free himself from his desires. Rather than dealing with the reality of death itself, O'Brien is using death to bring attention to the conflict between the Catholic sacrifice for the communal good and the secular sacrifice of the soul.

By employing a realist style and utilizing the tropes of popular romance novels to describe various kinds of death, both real and symbolic, O'Brien brings to the fore the underdevelopment of the Irish novel as a form. As Kiberd has rightly noted, *The Ante-Room*'s title "may also indicate [O'Brien's] conviction that the novel of personal relations in Ireland has yet to be fully made, the house of fiction has yet to be built and entered."[65] While much more can be made of the title, particularly in relation to death and Catholic life on earth as a waiting room for the life to come, Kiberd is right to point out O'Brien's desire to highlight the Irish novel as form that is not yet fully realized and which remains caught between the secular demands of literary realism and the non-empirical, spiritual needs attended to by religion. In *The Ante-Room* O'Brien suggests that the Irish novel must in some way mend this divide between realism and popular romance and address not only the reality of death but also the spiritual concerns it raises. In

[65] Kiberd, 572.

many ways Beckett's experimentation with the novel form in *Malone Dies* addresses many of these concerns by imagining a character who is caught between reality and fiction and attempts to engineer his own death by fictionally narrating it. In both O'Brien and Beckett death holds the possibility of release from the boundaries and constraints of reality. While Beckett's fictional depictions of death collapse the boundaries of form and structure, O'Brien's novel remains informed by these boundaries, failing to make the secular and the religious cohere or to imagine a world in which this reconciliation is possible.

Chapter Three

Deathbed Confessions and Unraveling Narration: Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*

I.

Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies,* the middle novel of the Trilogy, is one of the twentieth-century's most memorable and comic novelistic portrayals of the process of dying. Beckett's intention to explore the themes of death and dying is apparent in the novel's title itself, which declares the death of the narrator, Malone, even before the novel has begun. Within the Trilogy, *Malone Dies* is a transitional text, situated between *Molloy*, which depicts the process of establishing an "I" and the emergence of the writer, and *The Unnamable*, which can be read as the realization of Beckett's desire to abolish the subjective "I" so that narrator, author and character all become fused. *Malone Dies* is balanced between these two extremes of narrative subject and object, of death and the afterlife. Unlike *Ulysses* or *The Ante-Room*, which depict the effect that the dead or dying have on the living, Beckett's novel is focused on the process of dying itself, and on the role that narrative has in both depicting this process and in keeping death at bay.

Malone Dies stands out in this study as the novel most concentrated on death. In the other novels here, death and dying provokes new thoughts or actions in the characters. In *Ulysses*, for instance, the memory of deceased family members and thoughts about mortality shape the characters' movements and actions. Beckett's novel is different in that it is a text *about dying*. For Beckett's narrator, Malone, writing is both a compulsion and tool with which to engineer his own demise. Malone wishes to commit a kind of textual suicide, correlating the end of his narrative with his bodily expiration. Yet, he finds that despite his

attempts to hollow out and cut down his language and writing, he cannot fully attain his narrative goals but only approach them discursively, ultimately failing to formulate an identity through the convergence of his fictional creations. Therefore, his narrative cannot properly end, it can only trail off inconclusively.

In what follows, what will become clear is that the process of dying depicted in *Malone Dies* ramifies in powerful and interesting ways both outwards — towards other forms of literary theory and cultural and philosophical thought — and inwards in the sense that it seeks to annihilate or eradicate itself. In his portrayal of a narrator who is attempting to kill or end himself, Beckett is engaging with other major literary and philosophical movements concerned with the "death of the author," "the end of the novel," " the end of man." As much as Malone's desire to narrate his own death and failure to do so evoke these wider themes on the death of the subject in Western thought, the use of Catholic religious materials and the subversion of the *ars moriendi* tradition of religious writing on death, as well as the hints of Irish reference in the text, situate Beckett's novel in the Irish novel tradition while at the same seeking to eviscerate it. For the purposes of this study, *Malone Dies* will be seen as a text which implodes the Irish novel tradition where *Ulysses* explodes it; and which produces a set of unresolvable *aporia*, as against the ideological contradictions of *The Ante-Room*. Beckett's portrayal of Malone is the most concentrated depiction of dying and the most rigorous treatment of death in this study. It is also the most comic. In its portrayal of the entropic running down of textual energies *Malone Dies* succeeds in stripping novelistic narrative to its barest form. Yet rather than simply

depicting the "death" of the novel or the end of life, Beckett's novel ends inconclusively, leaving Malone still poised between life and death. Malone's failure to narrate his own demise is comic in a macabre way as it reveals the absurd nature of human desires to know or control death. The conflict between the desire to die and the desire to live and create impel the plot of the novel, highlighting the implicit connection between death and novelistic narrative. Even after narrative and religious structures for understanding human experience have been collapsed or dismantled, there still remains a human need for narrative, which at once offers distraction from the terror of death while also demanding a confrontation with mortality.

Beckett wrote *Malone Dies* just after World War II, during the most prolific period of his writing career, between May 1947 and January 1950. Though he began work on the novel directly after finishing *Molloy*, he soon found his writing blocked and decided to go to visit his mother, bringing a major work back home to Ireland with him for the first time in his career.[1] Beckett returned to Paris soon after completing *Malone Dies* and in the period between 1947 and 1950 produced the three novels that make up the Trilogy and wrote one of his most highly acclaimed plays, *Waiting for Godot*.[2] This period also coincided with Beckett's decision to write in French rather than his native English. The reason for writing in French, Beckett claimed, was that, for him, English was too burdened with allusions and association and what he called "Anglo-Irish

[1] Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 390.
[2] The play was not performed or published until 1953.

exuberance and automatisms."[3] He found that in French it was easier to write "without style" or to write in a sparer, leaner style.[4] This need to distance himself from his native language and to reinvigorate his fiction by finding a way of making the process of writing unfamiliar and strange has important implications for his depictions of death and dying in *Malone Dies*. Indeed, this method of writing in a pared-down style is related to his project of dismantling the narrative and religious structures that make sense of death and hold meaning in place. In *Malone Dies*, Beckett forces his readers to see the process of dying anew and challenges them to arrive at a different understanding of death.

Early critics and readers of Beckett's work have tended to interpret his decision to write in French as an attempt to distance himself from his Irish background. However, beginning in the nineteen-eighties there has been significant critical interest in situating Beckett in an Irish context. Since then critics such as Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd and David Lloyd and, more recently, Seán Kennedy, Emilie Morin and Patrick Bixby, have attempted to not only read Beckett's work in an Irish context but in a post-colonial one as well.[5]

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[3] James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 323-324.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), David Lloyd, "Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism and the Colonial Subject," *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 42-155, Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 530-550, *Beckett and Ireland,* Seán Kennedy, ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2009), and Patrick Bixby, *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Importantly, Seamus Deane has argued that Ireland functions as a "mode of absence" in Beckett's writing, suggesting that the lack of Irish referents in Beckett's texts becomes a way of representing Ireland.[6] Building on these arguments, Emilie Morin further argues that Beckett's Irish background contributes to his development as an artist, arguing that he is an *avant-garde* writer because of the way that he engages the Irish context by "deflecting it."[7] Kiberd observes that the landscape of south county Dublin is celebrated in the Trilogy and that, for Beckett, "the Gaelic tradition seemed posited on void, every poem an utterance in the face of imminent annihilation, every list an inventory of shreds from a culture verging on extinction," thus reinforcing the association of the Trilogy's evacuation of consciousness with Ireland's devastating colonial history.[8] But if Beckett's work can be linked to Irishness in these ways it can also be linked to it by virtue of its tendencies to subvert received forms of novelistic narration, a tendency to write parodic anti-novels evident in Irish writing from Laurence Sterne to James Joyce or Flann O'Brien. Like other Irish writers, Beckett is obsessed with religion even if that obsession most commonly takes comic or parodic form. "To die or not to die" is the question that seems to plague Malone, as well as many of Beckett's other characters. The answer that Malone seems to arrive at is that in order to die, he would first have to have lived and in order to live he must first escape the terror of death, even though in the end this is

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[6] Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 188.
[7] Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2009), 162.
[8] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 535, 537.

impossible. For Beckett, these paradoxes are the source of much agony and suffering but also of comedy, provoking in the reader a kind of mirthless laughter. While this humor cannot ease the pain of death it does serve to make it slightly less terrifying. Malone does not dread death; rather it is a desired end that he eagerly anticipates.

Malone Dies is not a comic novel in the traditional sense of the term, but succeeds in a kind of macabre humor that stems from Malone's failure to die properly. In *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Vivian Mercier has commented on the Irish propensity for macabre humor and defines it as that which inspires "laughter tinged with terror" and which serves as a "defence mechanism against the fear of death."[9] This seems a particularly apt way to characterize Malone's use of humor throughout the narrative as his jokes serve to deflect his fear, just as writing postpones his death. What makes *Malone Dies* humorous is Malone's attempt and failure to narrate his own demise. The cause of this failure is his inability to stop imagining. As Christopher Ricks has noted, Beckett's portrayals of the imagination's failure to imagine its own death reflects his desire to fail as no one else has failed.[10] What Beckett succeeds in doing is portraying the writer's inability to narrate death while also illustrating the importance of narrative as a way coping with death. By dismantling of the novel form Beckett forces his readers to confront the inevitability of death but also, through his use of macabre humor, makes this realization bearable.

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[9] Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
[10] Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures, 1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 43.

Narrated in the first person, *Malone Dies* is an account of Malone's attempt to record his own demise. All that is known about Malone's surroundings is that he is lying in a bed in a room that is neither an insane asylum nor a hospital, and that someone brings him food and takes away his waste. His most treasured possessions are his pencil and exercise book. Though Malone is certain that he will die, he remains unsure of when or how, and he occupies his time by creating an inventory of his possessions and inventing stories about Macmann and Lemuel, who are often read as alter-egos of Malone himself. These stories function as sub-plots meant to distract the reader, and Malone himself, from his own imminent death. From this setting and plot description, it is difficult to place Beckett in a distinctly Irish locale, or any locale for that matter. However, the vehemence of Malone's categorical rejection of the religious structures and rituals that surround dying, the confessional aspect to his writing, the persistence of the trope of the dead mother and his purgatorial state are all in line with Joyce's and O'Brien's depictions of death and dying, situating him in an Irish tradition of writing about death. Moreover, one of the most productive strands of criticism to emerge out of the intersection of Beckett studies and Irish studies has been, as Rónán McDonald has noted, the view of Beckett as a Protestant writer.[11] While Beckett's Protestant heritage appears on the surface to separate him from the Catholic authors in this study, the theme of death and dying serves as a useful

[11] Rónán McDonald, "The Ghost at the Feast: Beckett and Irish Studies," in *Beckett and Ireland,* ed., Seán Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24-25. McDonald further asserts that "[l]ooking at Beckett from the point of view of his Protestant background has the virtue of breaking the implied monolith of Irishness into constituent micro-narratives."

point of intersection where these various conceptions of Beckett as an Irish writer and a religious writer come together. Beckett was a member of the Anglo-Irish minority in a country dominated by Catholicism, and his work was influenced therefore by both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. A novel such as *Malone Dies* reveals this dual influence, weaving together Catholic concepts of confession and purgatory with Protestant concerns with self-reliance and self-scrutiny.[12]

Criticism on Beckett and death, and particularly on *Malone Dies*, has tended to focus on the relationship between writing and existence, Beckett's depictions of death as oblivion, the religious elements present in the text, and on death as a philosophical question. The collection *Beckett and Death*, edited by Steven Barfield, Matthew Feldman and Phillip Tew, offers a variety of critical approaches to Beckett's representation of dying. This volume suggests that the "juxtaposition between birth and death remains one of Beckett's favorite comic tropes," and it further proposes that while Beckett's fiction is characterized by its drive for oblivion it also "seems just as determined to never grasp death as an exact finitude or boundary."[13] The most important essays on death and the Trilogy in this collection—Erik Tonning's "Beckett's Unholy Dying: From *Malone Dies* to *The Unnamable*" and Elizabeth Barry's "Beckett, Augustine, and the Rhetoric of Dying"—discuss Beckett's fictional portrayals of dying and their connection to

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[12] Kiberd, 454. Kiberd suggests that the influence of Protestantism is apparent in Beckett's confrontation with the themes of the "puritan conscience: work, effort, reward, anxious self-scrutiny, the need for self-responsibility, and the distrust of artifice and even of art. His work seems like an answer to Shaw's prayer for a writer who would redefine Protestantism."
[13] Steven Barfield, Matthew Feldman and Philip Tew. eds. *Beckett and Death* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2009), 2.

religious ways of making sense of death. Though Malone rejects these religious conceptions of a good death, they continue to inform and structure his narrative, hinting at a persistent human need for meaning even while acknowledging that there is none.

At the beginning of *Malone Dies*, Malone initially presents his death as inevitable, but it turns out to be elusive and indeterminate. Death, then, is not simply a boundary but an imagined end, the knowledge of which drives the need for narrative creation. In his struggle to reconcile himself to death, Malone is determined to correlate his death moment with the end of his text, a goal he only partially accomplishes.[14] The exceptional nature of Beckett's novel stems from its experimentation with narrative form, structure and voice. *Malone Dies* works to reveal the structure and functioning of narrative only to dismantle or deconstruct it. Yet, no matter how hard Malone tries, he cannot quite bring his narrative to a satisfactory ending or reach the state of oblivion he seeks. It is fair to say, then, that Malone fails in his project of dying. While Malone succeeds in stripping his narrative down by killing characters and losing objects, by the end of the novel he has only reached an impasse; a pause in his narration before the voice of the Unnamable begins, this time with no characters or objects to manipulate.

While Beckett's outlook can hardly be called a humanist one — his work often questions long-held assumptions about man and his relationship with the

[14] Mark Nixon, " 'Writing Myself into the Ground': Textual Existence and Death in Beckett," in *Beckett and Death*, eds. Steven Barfield, Matthew Feldman and Philip Tew. (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2009), 25. Nixon argues that in *Malone Dies* the process of writing is equated with living and that Malone as author remains torn between leaving the last things unsaid and giving voice to the end.

world — his novel does work to reveal the functions of human desire and suffering.[15] The reader is left with no sense of satisfaction or closure, but what remains after the layers of narrative structure have been pared away are the fears and desires which drive the human need for order and meaning. The compulsion to reach what Peter Brooks would call the "unnamed meaning" of the text, a meaning that can never fully be known or articulated, is revealed through Malone's narrative and continued into *The Unnamable*.[16]

In *Malone Dies*, writing becomes a way of evacuating consciousness but also in its proliferation of stories, serves as an act of creation. Assuming the characteristics of a religious confessional, Malone's narrative functions as a purging of sin or expunging of past experiences, but also has life-giving properties. In some sense then, Malone's act of writing has a theological aspect to it. Yet as much as the act of writing may first appear to function as a substitute for more traditional forms of worship for Malone, at the end the reader is left with nothing but the ability to narrate nothing as the last of his lead pencil dwindles away and he loses the ability to write. Beckett's text leaves his readers at the end of his novel without the tools to construct narrative or to understand it but with a voice that is, nonetheless, compelled to narrate. Brooks argues that narrative provides a way for us to think about and understand our past and illustrates our

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[15] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language*, *Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124-127, 116. It is interesting to note that Foucault's famous anti-humanist text argues that Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* raises one of the "fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing" by asking what matter is it who is speaking.

[16] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 58.

refusal to “allow temporality to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our lives.”[17] While Beckett acknowledges this need for meaning is achieved through narrative, he also denies his reader that meaning. In fact, Beckett’s texts could be read as exercises in meaninglessness. Yet this seems, in many senses, to offer a much too simplistic reading of his novel. While Beckett may in fact be suggesting that our search for meaning and purpose is fruitless, he nonetheless acknowledges that the desire for meaning is unquenchable. Writing with an awareness of the persistent human need for meaning and order, Beckett deliberately denies these demands in order to emulate, as closely as possible, the experience of dying. Acknowledging the impossibility of accurately representing death, Beckett is instead narrating the experience of dying, both textual and physical. In this sense he is using the breakdown of the novel form to force his readers to face the reality of death, while also employing macabre humor to emphasize the human need for novelistic narrative as a way of ordering human experience and distracting from the horrors of death.

II.

Malone Dies is substantially different from any of the other novels in this study, and stands out in the novel tradition itself, in the way that it employs a meta-fictional narrative technique to reveal the forces structuring and driving narrative creation. Malone is not simply a character in Beckett’s novel, he is the

[17] Ibid., 323.

creator of the novel itself, blurring the lines between author and character, creator and created. Malone's need to narrate conflicts with his desire to die, or to reach the end of the text. Yet these two desires are not as contradictory as they may first appear. In fact, according to Freud, it is the conflicting urges to live and procreate (Eros), and to die and achieve stasis (Thanatos) that constitute human life.[18] Malone's process of dying, then, is not completely original or entirely unstructured. Even the meta-fictional narrative technique that Malone takes on is evident in the novel tradition as far back as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Malone's mode of first-person narrative is closely related to, and at points even parodies, religious manuals of an ideal death that offer advice on how to die properly.[19] What distinguishes Malone's project of dying is the unique way that he seeks to both employ and dismantle the religious structures and narrative techniques that attend death.

The concept of the *ars moriendi*, or the "art of dying", arose out of two related Latin texts: The *Tractatus* — a six-chapter treatise on the rituals and practices of death —and the other, known simply as *Ars Moriendi*, which featured illustrations of the dying surrounded by temptation. These texts were published anonymously and both enjoyed popularity during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and influenced later literary traditions concerning death and dying.[20]

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[18] Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents", in *The Freud Reader,* ed., Peter Gay (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1989), 754.
[19] For more on Beckett and Sterne see Patrick Murray, "The Shandean Mode: Beckett and Sterne Compared," *An Irish Quarterly Review*, 60 no. 237 (Spring, 1971), 55-67.
[20] See Nancy Lee Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: A Study of the Literary Tradition of the* "*Ars Moriendi" in England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

While the *ars moriendi* of the early Middle Ages emphasized collective judgment, beginning in the fifteenth century there was a shift of focus from communal to individual judgment. Texts such as these, which instructed the living on how to die a good death, multiplied as printed texts became more widely available, ultimately resulting in what is considered one of the genre's best texts, Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, published in London in 1651.[21] What is notable about Taylor's text is that it revises the originally Catholic *ars moriendi* and establishes it as a genre within Protestantism.[22] As is evident from this example, the tradition of the *ars moriendi* itself spans both Catholic and Protestant belief systems and for this reason, appealed to Beckett. In fact, Beckett read Taylor's book after the publication of "More Pricks than Kicks," and its influence is evident from the unfinished manuscript for his play, *Human Wishes*, based on Samuel Johnson's life, which features a character who reads a passage from Taylor's book (the passage itself a favorite of Dr. Johnson's).[23] While references to Taylor are not as explicitly evident in *Malone Dies*, Beckett undoubtedly drew upon this text heavily while writing his novel.[24] The influence of Taylor's book is apparent in Malone's decision to set himself against the ways of organizing one's life in preparation for death laid out by such texts.

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[21] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2008), 6.
[22] Ibid.
[23] James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 168, 251.
[24] Erik Tonning, "Beckett's Unholy Dying: From *Malone Dies* to *The Unnamable*," in *Beckett and Death*, eds. Steven Barfield, Matthew Feldman and Philip Tew (London: Continuumn, 2009), 109.

Malone's rejection of the *ars moriendi* is most apparent in his "ostentatious and otherwise unmotivated refusal to forgive his enemies—a staple instruction of every *Ars Moriendi* manual since medieval times."[25] Tonning's contention that Malone rejects holy dying because he sees it as conflicting with his own project which is "birth unto death" or oblivion is extremely useful here, as is his observation that Malone views reliance on God or an "external divinity" as an interference in his own project of self-knowledge.[26] For Malone, Christianity offers hope that individual existence will continue in another dimension and thus refuses the idea of death as a descent into nothingness. Tonning attempts to explain the seemingly casual Christian references in Beckett's novel as Malone's desire to find an alternative form of salvation. Rather than trying to die a "holy" death, Malone desires complete annihilation. However, the persistence of religious references and Malone's last prayer at the end are suggestive, Tonning argues, of his realization that his project has failed. Malone's "programme," through which he seeks to vanquish himself by creating fictional characters to confess for him, only succeeds in creating a further fiction, an extension of his own life. Essentially, Malone fails to die properly, even according to his own plan, and therefore the novel itself fails to offer an alternative *ars moriendi* but succeeds in challenging the notions of a "good" or "ideal" death laid out by such death manuals.

Beckett's inversion of the religious tradition of a "good death," the religious confessional and the persistence of Christian references throughout his

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[25] Tonning, 109.
[26] Ibid., 112.

text, alongside modern notions of death as absence or void, highlight the conflicts troubling modern man. Without the comfort offered by the knowledge that a loved one died a "good death" and has attained eternal life in heaven, humans have few ways of making sense of death or achieving consolation. Beckett seeks to explore the beliefs underlying human's understanding of life and death by dismantling the religious structures that inform these beliefs and studying what remains when these structures are gone. Nonetheless, traces of religious references remain in Beckett's texts, even if his ultimate goal is to eradicate them. In his failure to completely erase the Christian elements of his text, Beckett is suggesting that religious ways of making sense of death have some value but that they are in need of reinvention.

In order to fully make sense of Beckett's attempts to dismantle the notion of a "good death," it is necessary to understand the Christian imagery that is prevalent throughout Malone's text. *Malone Dies* opens with Malone announcing: "I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of it all."[27] However, this seemingly definite statement is called into question when Malone contradicts himself a few sentences later when he writes: "Indeed, I would not put it past me to pant on to the Transfiguration, not to speak of the Assumption. But I do not think I am wrong in saying that these rejoicings will take place in my absence, this year."[28] The Transfiguration, a Christian feast day, celebrates Christ's revelation of himself as God in the form of man. Significantly, Malone is placing himself in a

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[27] Samuel Beckett, *The Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder Publications, 1959), 179.
[28] Ibid.

God-like position in this text, as creator and master of the fictional lives of Sapo, Macmann, and Lemuel. His reference to panting on past the Transfiguration could suggest an ability to endure beyond a Christian heaven, seeing death not as a beginning or an end but as a state in between the two. The celebrations of the liturgical calendar that Malone attempts to use as structural marking points for his existence instead serve merely as reminders of the absence of order. The Assumption celebrates Mary's departure from earth and ascent into heaven. Catholic teaching as to the day, year or manner of Mary's death are all uncertain, and it is also unclear as to whether Mary was assumed to heaven before or after her bodily death. The fact that these religious references are included here is at once indicative of the human need for religion to structure temporal experience, while underscoring the arbitrary nature of such conventions. Mary's time and place of death is a mystery, but it has still been designated a feast day on the liturgical calendar. It is evident from the first few sentences of Beckett's novel that Malone cannot quite accept his own death, despite his attempts to do so. He tries to anticipate his death, saying that he will soon be "quite dead at last in spite of it all," suggesting that any efforts to prevent death or indeed to hasten it will be in vain. There is a darkly comic aspect to Malone's statement in the sense that he states that he shall soon be quite dead and then proceeds to defer his death by listing the holidays that will take place in his absence. Malone's playful approach to death as something he has long desired but has up until now failed to attain reduces the seriousness attached to the question of death without making it any less real.

The reader's interest in Malone's narrative is compelled by two questions: Will he actually die? And if he succeeds in rejecting a religious death, what will follow life? Tonning argues that Malone's project of rejecting divinity may indeed have proved impossible, concluding as it does, on a type of mystical prayer for light through the darkness. He emphasizes that this prayer goes un-answered while the space or life beyond Malone's text continues to exist.[29] The line Tonning is referring to comes at the end of the text when Malone is describing how Lemuel will never hit anyone anymore with his hammer or stick, "…or with his pencil or with his stick or or light light I mean never there he will never never anything there any more."[30] It is significant that Malone's own wishes are projected onto his narrative. Despite the fact that his narration is focused on Lemuel, his own emotions begin to interfere with his story. This is most evident in the reference to light as he breaks in with a corrective tic "I mean" to suggest that it is in fact *he* that desires light. While death and oblivion are often associated with darkness, here Malone sees his life as darkness and he imagines the oblivion he seeks as light and white or blank. Malone would like some form of light to illuminate his own existence, to distinguish between himself and his fictions and therefore regain control over his own narrative. At the same time, he realizes that he will never achieve illumination. The references to the stick and pencil — the former which Malone has lost and the latter which is quickly dwindling — suggest that Malone is referring to his own lack of ability to manipulate either the external world or that of his fiction. Malone's prayer for

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[29] Tonning, 117.
[30] Beckett, 288.

oblivion is ultimately denied because of the strong bond between himself and his text. Malone's very process of dying is linked with the process of writing. His attempt to dissolve his fictions and insist that nothing will exist anymore is at once a final attempt at control while at the same time an example of his complete lack of control over his text. Malone is calling for light while narrating darkness. Even as he acknowledges a lack of structure and meaning to human existence, Malone is still compelled to seek illumination.

Malone's stories of Sapo, the boy who becomes Macmann and then becomes Lemuel near the end of the text, provide an escape from the confines of his own mind but cannot provide relief from pain or bodily suffering. This pain is what reminds him of his own mortality and also works to reveal the boundaries that order human experience. Malone finds a way of ordering his own life by inventing these fictional characters but writing their stories also serves as a painful reminder of his own failures. Malone's inventory of his possessions serves to connect him to the outside world, even as his relationship to that world slowly deteriorates. The inventory of his possessions becomes increasingly important to him as the novel progresses, revealing the anxiety and fear that death will divorce him from the world of objects. Malone's ordering and collection of objects mocks manuals of dying such as Taylor's that instruct the dying to order their lives by writing wills and inventorying possessions. It is in the sections that discuss Malone's possessions that his narrative's resemblance to both the *ars moriendi* and the closely related deathbed confessional becomes most apparent.

After deciding that his inventory must come after his stories, Malone questions whether he can resign himself to dying without leaving an inventory behind and concludes: "[p]resumably I can, since I intend to take that risk. All my life long I have put off this reckoning, saying, Too soon, too soon. Well it is still too soon… This moment seems now at hand."[31] Here, Malone's language takes on an evangelical tone with the word "reckoning" and the phrase describing the moment "now at hand" mimicking sacred language designed to encourage believers to redeem themselves of their sins so they can attain the kingdom of Heaven at the hour of judgment that will soon be "at hand." Malone's efforts to collect his objects and bring them all to his deathbed with him is reminiscent of death manuals such as Taylor's that encourage the dying person to set his or her house in order, creating wills and mending disputes. The need to produce an inventory that will supposedly order his life is futile, as the project of establishing which objects belong to him proves problematic. Malone writes of the difficulty of establishing ownership of his objects: "For only those things are mine the whereabouts of which I know well enough to be able to lay hold of them, if necessary, that is the definition I have adopted, to define my possessions. For otherwise there would be no end of it. But in any case there will be no end to it."[32] Here, endlessness becomes a characteristic even of physical objects whose reality is supposed to be finite. The only thing that counters the infinite is a definition that has been "adopted" in an effort to reach an ending. Beckett seems here to be suggesting that the sense of an ending that Malone is experiencing is in fact a

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[31] Ibid., 181.
[32] Ibid., 250.

construct that has been created in order arbitrarily to form a boundary between this world and another, less determinate reality. There is a distinction here between thought and action, between speech and silence. Malone at once recognizes that he cannot reach the ending that he desires without first establishing the boundaries that define his reality, while acknowledging that these boundaries are not as stable as they might first appear.

While Malone's body should provide a reminder of his own mortality, it is so useless in manipulating the objects in his room that it fails to serve as an indicator of whether he is living or dead. By employing the structure of the *ars moriendi* and Taylor's rules of holy dying, Beckett is pointing out the arbitrary nature of such deathbed conventions. Malone's narrative attempts to create an alternate model of how to die, free from the structures of organized religion with its ideas of sacrifice and redemption. Malone's project succeeds in destroying these structures put in place by religious deathbed confessionals, but the destruction of these conventions serves, more than anything, to reveal the human need for structure and divinity. Without the boundaries between this world and the next imposed by Christian notions of the afterlife, a conclusive or definitive ending becomes difficult to achieve.

Malone's world lacks meaning and its objects lack any sense of the sacred. Nevertheless, physical objects are important to him. The importance of these objects illustrates Malone's desire to collect goods in an effort to establish his identity or to give his life meaning. In the end, these objects prove empty and meaningless without the words to define them. Malone has no time for rituals or

manuals of dying; even after he plans his own narrative "programme," he cannot adhere to this form and must deviate from it in his "hurry to be done."[33] At the same time, Malone contradicts himself, saying that he is in no hurry, thus emphasizing the conflicting pulls of his desire to reach the end and his fear of the end. In *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*, Alan Warren Friedman blames this lack of time for death on modern technologies, largely in the form of medical advancements that have "removed death from the home and rendered it artificial, arranged, civilization's chief product."[34] This artificial arrangement is the very structure that Malone is attempting to disarrange. In his efforts to strip away the constructs surrounding death, Malone returns again and again to historical events or feast days on the liturgical calendar in order to structure his experience. Malone's struggle to maintain his narrative after it has been freed from its constraints or structures not only reveals the conventions of narrative itself, but exposes the drives and desires behind the need to narrate.

III.

Malone's attempts to deconstruct or dismantle the Christian notion of a "good death" results in a breakdown of the distinction between self and other, living and dying, beginning and end, plunging him into a purgatorial state of non-existence. This purgatorial state is the result of Malone's rejection of Christian

[33] Ibid., 207.
[34] Alan Warren Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.

conceptions of death and the afterlife, but also reveals the influence of Catholic ideas of salvation and functions as a reminder of Ireland.[35] It is significant that Beckett should depict Malone in a purgatorial state as it indicates Beckett's own familiarity with Catholicism. While Protestants believe that upon death the faithful are delivered directly to heaven, the sinners directly to hell, Catholics believe in a state after death where souls remain stranded between two extremes. Despite its religious associations, the trope of purgatory has a distinct tradition in literature as well, perhaps most importantly in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, an epic poem that had a profound influence on both Joyce and Beckett.

Beginning in the twelfth century, purgatory was believed to be located in Ireland on Station Island near Lough Derg. This site is believed to be the place where St. Patrick sent penitents down a dark hole to repent for their sins. This association between Ireland and purgatory is important as it points to a greater link between Beckett's work and a prominent theme in twentieth-century Irish culture. Pascale Casanova has argued that Beckett puts Ireland at the center of his texts by linking it with purgatory, calling purgatory one of Western society's greatest religious and literary mythologies. Purgatory is indeed a prominent feature in the work of many major Irish writers and poets of the twentieth century, including W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney.[36] It is significant that one of Yeats's best plays should be called *Purgatory*, and that Beckett should also capitalize on

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[35] John L. Murphy, "Beckett's Purgatories," in *Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative*, ed. Colleen Jaurretche (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 111. "Purgatory remains the most Beckettian position of the three realms assumed in Catholic afterlife. His heaven and hell lie static; purgatory suggests energy and vitality."

[36] Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2006), 49-50.

this theme. This preoccupation with purgatory indicates a larger anxiety concerning death in twentieth-century Irish literature. As with the in-between state that Malone inhabits, the characters in Yeats's *Purgatory* occupy a hollowed-out landscape, observing ghosts of the past in the ruins of an old home. Both Yeats's play and Beckett's novel feature characters who must narrate the past in order to make peace with it, and both end with murder — Lemuel murders the inmates in his care and the Old Man murders the Boy in Yeats's play. Yeats's play, however, differs from Beckett's novel in that the killing of the Boy is performed in order to prevent history from repeating itself. For Yeats, the act of narration can serve to appease the souls of the purgatorial dead and to release them from suffering. For Beckett, the act of narrative may help to empty consciousness and to ease suffering but it does not end it. Despite his dismantling of narrative structures, Malone remains trapped between the extremes of life and death and is unable to escape suffering. For Malone, the Christian promise of eternal life is not a reward but as an agonizing continuation of life.

Through Malone's systematic rejection of Christian death rituals, he is attempting to free himself from the suffering attached to penance and to escape the fate of choosing between heaven and hell. However, in the absence of Christian notions of sin and redemption, there is no end to suffering, only a perpetual purgatorial state of un-being. Beckett is experimenting with the modern idea of a godless world, a place where salvation is not only questionable but virtually impossible to attain. Malone's own purgatorial state is significant because it is at once an erasure of self while also serving to reaffirm it. The ritual

of purgatory performed at Lough Derg, where penitents descend into a dark hole, was, as Peggy O'Brien has noted, a "submission to total self-effacement" while also resulting in "an increased sense of both new-found isolation and reaffirmed selfhood."[37] These two contradictory effects of purgatory are apparent in Malone's narrative in which he attempts to efface his own selfhood while also struggling to determine his identity.

This purgatorial state that he finds himself in is affirmed when Malone notes: "[y]es I shall be natural at last, I shall suffer more, then less, without drawing any conclusions, I shall pay less heed to myself, I shall be neither hot nor cold any more. I shall be tepid, I shall die tepid, without enthusiasm."[38] This description of his own process of dying is particularly interesting because it deliberately sets Malone against Jeremy Taylor, defying his *Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying.* Taylor asserts that "[s]crupulous persons are always the most religious; and that to feel nothing is not *of life* but *of death*."[39] Additionally, Taylor notes: "a lukewarm person is only secured in his own thoughts but very unsafe in the event, and despised by God."[40] Malone's project, to die "lukewarm," purposely defies the rules laid out by Taylor. Malone's goal is to die and part of dying is feeling nothing. His desire to die lukewarm suggests that his own

[37] Peggy O'Brien, *Writing Lough Derg: From William Carleton to Seamus Heaney* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), xxii.
[38] Beckett, 180.
[39] Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (London: R. Royston, 1651), 297. http://gateway.proquest.com.eproxy.ucd.ie/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:45783:157.
[40] Ibid.

thoughts, and his being secured or saved in his own mind, are more important than proving anything to God.

Malone's references to hot and cold suggest opposite poles or extremes. Instead of being either cold or hot, Malone shall be "tepid", between these two limits. By forgetting himself or at least "paying less heed" to himself, Malone is able to achieve a status in between life and death, again reminiscent of purgatory. Part of the way that he achieves this is by destroying the distinction between himself and his text. If Malone distinguishes between himself as author and as character, he will be forced to "watch" his own death in the sense that he will narrate it. However, if he fails to make this division, he will continue to exist between the two. Malone at once desires to prolong his life by writing and inventing, but he also finds this purgatorial existence excruciating.

The state of suffering that Malone finds himself in can, in part, be attributed to his inability to remember his past or establish his own identity. He manages to relieve some of his mental anguish and suffering by creating stories, dissolving the boundaries between himself and his inventions, but he cannot escape his physical pain and suffering. This is where the influence of Johnson's "Sick Man's Journal" on Beckett becomes most evident, serving to illuminate Malone's problematic position. Tonning has noted that Malone's position at the end of the text becomes a "Johnsonian" one in that Malone's inability to escape suffering is contrasted with Johnson's commitment to Christian salvation through which his suffering is relieved.[41] Writing about the ending of *Malone Dies,*

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[41] Tonning, 114.

Tonning observes: "In the absence of Christ's victory over death and the order imposed by divine justice in the final judgment, we are left in *The Unnamable* with all-encompassing damnation consisting in a perpetual dissolution of identity: a process of '*positive* annihilation'."[42] In this example, the absence of salvation or the guarantee of eternal life proves not to be a negative thing as what Malone truly seeks is oblivion or "positive annihilation." Despite his efforts to expel human desires and needs, Malone fails to attain oblivion as he is compelled to narrate even though he lacks a subject or object of narration. Therefore Malone's in-between purgatorial state is painful but it allows him a particular kind of playfulness, that functions as a defense against the fear of death.

Malone's purgatorial state allows him to put off death, to continue to exist between the extremes of life and death. Interestingly, in this middle novel of the trilogy, Malone has admitted: "[t]his exercise book is my life, it has taken me a long time to resign myself to that. And yet I shall not throw it away. For I want to put down in it, those I have called to my help, but ill, so that they did not understand, so that they may cease with me. Now rest," thus linking the purgatorial state of writing to his life.[43] This state of being tied to his narrative is painful, but gives Malone a certain power. Malone does not face any real decisions as everything is deferred to another time and yet he exists in a continual state of desire to know the end, to finish, goals that he cannot quite achieve.

Malone's darkly comic approach to his situation serves to make the question of death less frightening and more approachable. Malone is strikingly

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Beckett, 279.

aware of his state of un-being in all its complexity. He expresses a profound desire for closure, for ending, that manifests itself in his desire for death. In his study of the British deathbed scene, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction,* Garrett Stewart has rightly pointed out that while the deathbed scenes of modernists like Hardy and Conrad express a "repressed yearning for the spiritual sureties" of the Victorian deathbed, Beckett's *Malone Dies* expresses a "sardonic nostalgia" and a "vain craving" for "closural satisfaction" that takes the "inverted form of a metaphysical send-up expelling from the confines of narrative all the familiar prescriptions for dramatized demise in literature."[44] Indeed, the striking thing about Malone's paring away of traditional narrative constructions is that it does not function as a collapse but rather as an excretion, an outpouring of words. Malone's use of these literary modes of dying such as the deathbed confessional serves to not only express a kind of nostalgia for these older and more comforting modes of ending, but also reveals the way that they bound a regulate narrative. This notion of ending and of death as a way of encapsulating life is confounded by the figure of Malone who has no clear sense of beginning or ending and therefore cannot establish whether he is living or dead.

IV.

Malone's narrative is driven by his paradoxical desires to die and also to establish his origins. By writing invented stories, Malone attempts to make sense of his history and understand his past. It is by achieving an understanding of who

[44] Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 321.

he is and where he came from that Malone hopes to escape his purgatorial state of indeterminacy. However, as both author and narrator of his own story, Malone has difficulty establishing his origins or dividing himself from his stories. While his position as author gives him authority over his narrative, it deprives him of a sense of origins or identity. Near the beginning of the novel, Malone notes that he "could die today, if I wished, merely by making a little effort. But it is just as well to let myself die, quietly, without rushing things. Something must have changed."[45] Malone is expressing his god-like control over his own text. As author, he possesses the power to end himself or his text. Yet as soon as he articulates this ability he immediately backs down, saying that it is better to let himself go without rushing to the end. The "something must have changed" could suggest that Malone is looking for some kind of retrospective view of his life, something that will give it meaning. In the next sentence he resolves: "I will not weigh upon the balance anymore, one way or the other," suggesting that what has changed is that he has decided to give up balancing between subject and object, author and character. This decision has profound implications for Malone's narrative as without this distinction, Malone also loses the power of understanding death through the narrative of someone else's life. Without the retrospective understanding of life achieved in the deathbed scene, Malone has no way of making sense of his own life and death.

As is evident from the other novels in this study, the Irish novelistic deathbed scene is linked to Catholic redemption or guilt through the figure of the

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[45] Beckett, 23.

mother. This trope of the dying or dead mother is challenged in Beckett's novel, where Malone is unable to determine who his mother is or indeed, to separate himself from her. The trope of the dying or dead mother is apparent in both Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which Stephen is encouraged to pray for his mother on her deathbed, and in O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* in which Teresa, the dying mother, seeks to mend relations between her children before she dies, while the threat of her death provokes prayers and religious devotions from her family. For Beckett, as for Joyce and O'Brien, the mother is associated with both birth and death. However, in *Malone Dies*, Malone assumes the role of author, narrator, and creator and in so doing becomes his own mother.

Malone's act of writing is undoubtedly linked to his desire to understand death. He hopes that by narrating the lives of others he can both distract himself from his own death and understand his own life. Brooks has argued that narrative is a way of understanding human experience and temporality, or "man's time-bound-edness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality."[46] Malone's act of narrative can, then, be best understood as an attempt to understand his own experience. However, unlike a conventional narrator, Malone's experiences as character cannot be divided from his experiences as author, and therefore his narrative cannot achieve the retrospective quality that will give his life meaning or enable him to better understand life or death. The threat of death compels Malone's need to narrate and invent, but without any way of separating himself from these creations, Malone cannot truly die.

[46] Brooks, 104.

As noted in earlier chapters, Freud's theory of the death drive, as outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is of great relevance here, particularly his argument that all humans possess the contradictory impulses towards life and procreation or towards death and self-destruction.[47] In "Civilization and its Discontents," Freud elaborates this theory further, arguing that these contradictory impulses of *Eros* and *Thanatos* manifest themselves in a sense of guilt, and that Christianity capitalizes on this sense of guilt and offers relief from it in the form of redemption, achieved through the sacrificial death of a single person.[48] Malone's rejection of the religious structures informing the process of dying, then, has profound implications for how death functions in his narrative. Without the idea of redemption and belief in the sacrificial death of Christ, Malone has no sense of guilt to prevent his death and yet he also cannot achieve oblivion. Malone's repetition compulsion, his desire for death, his dismantling of narrative form as well as his obsession with bodily disintegration, conforms to Freud's theory of the death drive. However, as Malone cannot establish who his mother is, or what his origins are, his drive towards death is hardly motivated by his desire to return to a primordial state and, if anything, Malone seems to already exist in this state.

Malone concludes that he is an old foetus. He confirms: "Yes an old foetus, that's what I am now, hoar and impotent, mother is done for, I've rotted her, she'll drop me with the help of gangrene, perhaps papa is at the party too, I'll

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[47] Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition to the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI, ed. James Starchey (London: Hogarth Press), 53-54.
[48] Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," 764.

land head-foremost mewling in the charnel-house, not that I'll mewl, not worth it."[49] In this example, Malone envisions his death as a reverse-birth. The image of Malone as an "old foetus" is a darkly comic one, conjuring images of a baby with a wrinkled complexion and grey hair and serves to bring together the two mysteries of human existence, birth and death. As an "old foetus" he has already returned to a pre-birth state and is therefore not motivated simply by his desire to return to the mother. Death here is figured not as ending but as beginning. Malone has "rotted" his mother and yet his reference to gangrene (death in the tissue of a part of the body) suggests that he is still attached to her and, as part of the same body, can only be freed of her by death. Intriguingly, after being freed from the rotted-out corpse of his mother (and possibly his father), Malone envisions himself landing in the charnel house, suggesting that he will not only be dead, but a skeleton, devoid of flesh. His location in the charnel house, a place where bones are interred after their flesh has rotted away, implies that his separation from his mother can only be achieved through their shared bodily decay, not through a death of consciousness. Malone is his own mother and creator, and rather than leading back to his pre-birth state as Freud's theory of the death drive suggests, he will instead achieve birth only through death. Thus, Malone's death is not a return to the mother but a separation from her. Malone's description of landing head-first and mewling into the charnel house mimics the language used to describe births with the baby crying or whimpering as he is delivered. The birth-unto-death described here differs from ordinary birth or death; it is a condition that exists

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[49] Beckett, 226.

between the two states as birth implies an emergence into life as a physically separate being. Malone's desire for death, then, is not driven by a desire to return to a state before life, but rather by a desire for a separate existence, divided from the body of his mother and father, separated from his past.

The notion that Malone is his own mother or creator and also his own father can be linked to the question of the relationship between author and narrator and Malone's inability to separate the two. In order to divide himself from his fictions, Malone must either succeed in killing them off or in dying himself; he must relinquish his need to narrate. Yet, Malone's narration is impelled not only by his desire to know or reach the end, but also by his fear of blankness and of absence. Freud's repetition compulsion is illustrated in Malone's variant on his original statement that he shall "soon be quite dead in spite of it all."[50] After much inner debate about when he wrote that he shall soon be quite dead, Malone concludes that he wrote it when he was unaware that he was repeating himself, at the point when he decided that he would live and "die alive."[51] He describes the way he found the exercise book, just when he needed it. On the first page he writes: "Soon I shall be quite dead at last, and so on, without even going on to the next page, which was blank."[52] Here, Malone is re-living the experience of finding the exercise book and of writing that he will soon be dead. The certainty of his own death becomes a mantra for Malone as he attempts to write himself out of existence through repetition. Writing, however, serves not as

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[50] Ibid., 209.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 210.

a destructive force, but becomes a way of representing absence or making inexistence present within the text. Malone writes of his own death but still leaves blank pages in an effort to prolong his life, continue his narration. He knows that if he fills the entire exercise books his narrative will come to an end. Yet the possibilities of the blank pages, the unfulfilled meaning they represent, are also what propel Malone's narrative and drive it forward. Malone's act of writing is something that he is compelled to do, and is driven by his desire to fill the blank pages, to complete his life. It also serves, paradoxically, as an evacuation of consciousness, a purging of sin. Malone has usurped his mother and assumed her role as creator, thus encompassing within his own being both the beginning and the end of life, making it impossible for him to die. Instead, Malone is forced to write in an effort to purge his consciousness of thought and end his life. His narrative then, takes on a confessional form that serves to lay bare the desires and drives that compel narration.

V.

The confessional form gives Malone's narrative a shape and purpose in theory but does not provide him with a better understanding of his motivations. Nor does it serve as a means of organizing his life in preparation for the life to come. Part of the problem with Malone's confessional is that it is not his sins he is confessing but those of the fictional characters he creates. Even as Beckett's characters express a human desire to reach the end, to know death, it remains

outside of their grasp, even in an imagined fictionalized form. While seeking in some sense to emulate the religious deathbed confessional, unlike this older form Malone's text shifts the focus from a self's confession to another, to a self confessing to himself. The hermeneutic mode described here does not serve to reveal hidden secrets but indicates that there is nothing to confess. While the point of the confessional in religious texts is to repent for sins and thereby achieve salvation and eternal life, Malone himself does not admit to any sins. The fictional characters that Malone invents become a way of ridding himself of his past transgressions and, in essence, escaping himself. By fleeing the agonizing confines of his own mind, Malone hopes to achieve oblivion.

Malone's goal of ridding himself of sin through fictional characters is an attempted evacuation of his own consciousness, an effort to be less self-aware. The fictionalization of his past lives in the form of Sapo, Macmann and Lemuel serves to distance him from the past rather than providing any sense of retrospection. Stewart has noted that "Malone forges other selves so as to become the author, not just the victim, of his own effacement. If he can utter it, maybe he can suffer it without inordinate pain."[53] Malone's separation from his past in the form of writing gives him a sense of control over his life and death while also providing an escape from the pain of memory. Malone describes how, when he first started writing, his characters came to him, "pleased that someone would want to play with them", but that "it was not long before I found myself alone, in

[53] Stewart, 327.

the dark."[54] In an effort to save himself from the darkness, he gives up trying to "play," and describes how he "took to [himself] for ever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wondering, darkness, long stumbling with outstretched arms, hiding."[55] Malone took up writing and inventing characters so as not to be alone with himself as well as to defer death. However, as soon as his stories ended he found himself alone again. He therefore gives up writing or "playing" for a period. Malone sees this time as a period of darkness during which he did not have a means of expression or escape. Trapped in "earnestness" Malone has spent "nearly a century trying to escape."[56] Now he has given himself over to "play," unconcerned with the separation between himself and his fictions. This state of play is essentially a state where separation or boundaries do not exist and therefore meaning or objective truth proves elusive. Malone's efforts to separate himself from himself succeed only in further blurring his identity as the line between author and character becomes less determinate. Malone's project of dying reveals the inexpressible nature of death but also emphasizes his state of indeterminacy, caught between the desire to narrate and the desire for silence.

The religious confessional becomes, in the novel form, a way of relating a character's motivations to a reader. Beckett plays with this relationship between the character and the reader by presenting the reader with a narrator who constantly contradicts himself and who cannot divide himself from his fictions, collapsing the distance between writer and character, author and narrator. The

[54] Beckett, 180.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

written word does not simply depict or reflect reality in Beckett's novel, but serves to undermine the certainties of existence and of death. The reader is plunged into Malone's inventing consciousness that makes truth indeterminable. The confessional form also has a meta-fictional aspect to it as Malone comments on his current state, his writing and his character's actions. In many ways, these meta-fictional aspects to Beckett's novel resemble those found in fellow Irishman Laurence Sterne's 1758 novel, *Tristram Shandy*. As Patrick Murray has noted, all of Beckett's novels, aside from *Murphy*, do not have recognizable plots and "have no real beginning or end, breaking off when the inimitable flow of talk dries up."[57] The similarities between *Malone Dies* to *Tristram Shandy* are of particular note because they reveal the ways that Beckett is employing old forms only to dismantle them. The comparison to Sterne's novel also serves to situate Beckett's work in a larger context of Irish writing that defies linear narrative temporality and plotting, and disrupts narrative unity or wholeness. The meta-fictional quality of these texts also makes them humorous as the narrative is commenting and even ridiculing his own situation in the text. Whereas in *Tristram Shandy* the proliferation of stories and narratives becomes a kind of farce that mocks the exaggerated importance attached humans attach to their own individual lives, *Malone Dies* pares narrative down to its barest functioning and in so doing parodies human attempts to control or understand death.

As Malone dies, he resolves to tell himself stories in order to relieve the tedium of waiting. He even plans a "programme" that he intends to follow in

[57] Murray, 64.

order to structure and organize his narrative. After some deliberation, Malone decides that the programme will involve five different parts: "Present state, three stories, inventory, there."[58] He then remarks: "An occasional interlude is to be feared. A full programme I shall not deviate from it any further than I must. So much for that. I feel I am making a great mistake. No matter."[59] It is interesting to note that even as Malone sets out a plan for himself, he immediately anticipates deviations from the plan, and fears that it is a mistake to have made the plan at all. Even as he knows that imposing a structure on his narrative may prove problematic, he cannot stop himself from ordering his writing in this way. What becomes clear from Malone's resolutions about the shape, structure and delivery of his narrative is that he is attempting to construct an ideal format for his story and thereby do things he has "always wanted to do" but never has. The need to fulfill these desires is driven by his proximity to death. Malone declares that his "desire is henceforward to be clear without being finical. I have always wanted that too. It is obvious I may suddenly expire, at any moment."[60] It is clear from this passage that Malone's nearness to death is not only what structures his narrative but also what allows him to attempt the realization of his desires. Malone's desire to know his own death, to be clear about it, is linked to his determination to make his writing as clear as possible without being overly exacting about it. At the same time, it is Malone's awareness of the

[58] Beckett, 182.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 181.

unpredictability of death, his inability to know the precise moment it will come, that makes him unsure of how exactly to shape his story.

Whether or not he succeeds in following it, Malone's "programme" can be read as a kind of plot, a structuring of narrative. Eric Levy, however, makes a distinction between Malone's "programme" and traditional novelistic plot. He writes: "But in narrating his own elapsation, Malone replaces the convention of plot (which concerns a temporal sequence of events tending toward some terminus or end) with the convention of 'programme' (MAL, 269) whose function, unlike that of plot, is not causal but diversionary, 'While waiting I shall tell myself stories, if I can' (180)."[61] However diversionary Malone's programme may be, the need for diversion is, Brooks would argue, a necessary aspect of plot as it extends the desire for closure before reaching the end. Therefore, Malone's diversion becomes part of the plot structure itself, driven as it is by fear of death. Malone's stories can then be read as what Brooks would call "intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative."[62] The stories that Malone tells himself of Sapo, Macmann and Lemuel progress in a temporal sequence from adolescence to old age. While these stories may not function in the same way as a traditional plot in the sense that Malone keeps interrupting their progression, they do serve in some way as a kind of retrospective of Malone's life, albeit a fictional one. It is in this sense as well that Malone's narrative resembles more plot-driven novels that feature a review of a character's life leading up to his death, such as

[61] Eric P. Levy, *Beckett and the Voice of Species: A Study of the Prose Fiction* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), 84.
[62] Brooks, 104.

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.[63] This novel begins with the death of Ivan Illych and then moves backwards to review his life leading up to death. Though the novel begins from the perspective of the mourners, the focus then shifts to Illych himself, hinting at the increasing privatization of the deathbed scene while also imposing a retrospective narrative that begins with the final judgment of a man's life before examining how his life was lived. Malone's narrative takes this privatization of the deathbed and the notion of individual salvation to a new extreme, as he must both give witness and testimony to his own demise.

Throughout his narrative, Malone struggles to adhere to his "programme," but ultimately fails to achieve any sort of retrospection and therefore fails in his project of dying. The lack of a period or end point as a grammatical signifier of closure provides evidence that no determinate meaning or point of closure has been reached by the end of Malone's narrative. This failure to determine meaning stems from Malone's inability to establish a difference between memory and creation, whether he is living or dead. The lack of separation between the physical world and the world of his imagination has severe repercussions for his project of dying. It is only Malone's bodily pain that reminds him that he is still part of the physical world. He confesses: "The truth is, I did not feel myself dying I could well believe myself dead, expiating my sins, or in one of heaven's mansions. But I feel at last that the sands are running out, which would be the case if I were in heaven or hell. Beyond the grave, the sensation of being beyond the grave was

[63] Leo Tolstoy, *The Death Of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (1886; repr., London: Vintage, 2009)

stronger with me six months ago."[64] Suffering, in this example, is a way of separating the earthly world of physical sensation from the spiritual realm. Interestingly, this process of bodily suffering does not redeem Malone; he can still go to either heaven or hell. However, he does note that the sense that time is running out does not vanish with death but remains in both heaven and in hell. The idea that his sensation of "being beyond the grave" was stronger with him "six months ago" suggests that his sense of temporality is distorted and he has no clear idea of whether he is progressing or regressing.

This notion of being caught between inner and outer realities, between moving forward or slipping backwards, characterizes Malone's state and also highlights the relationship between dying and narrating. Stewart argues that "The paradox of death for Beckett, at once inner and outer, here and coming, inherent and unarrived, is at last and at large the paradox of narrative art as spatialized temporality. Story, a shape as well as a duration, is present to us as a defined whole even when it moves, or we through it, towards the completion of itself as a form."[65] Malone's act of dying, then, is intrinsically linked with his act of writing, of narrating his own demise. As we readers move through Malone's text, we are also moving closer to death and to the end of the novel. The act of narrating is equated with life itself. The comic aspects of the novel come from Malone's failure to accomplish his goal of narrating his own demise or of writing himself to death. Malone thinks of how he remembers the last few days better than any other days and notes: "When I have completed my inventory, if my death is not ready

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[64] Beckett, 184.
[65] Stewart, 325.

for me then, I shall write my memoirs. That's funny, I have made a joke. No matter."[66] Malone's contention that he will write his memoirs is a "joke" because it is an impossibility: he cannot write about what he cannot remember. This macabre humor serves to defend Malone against the terror of his own death. Malone realizes that he cannot really engineer his own death and that, in fact, even after all his preparation, death may not be "ready" for him. Malone's narrative does not simply depict a progression towards death it is also a move towards accepting mortality.

Malone assumes that, eventually, he will run out of lead and is concerned with correlating this loss of material objects with the death of his mind. However, he has no way of controlling his own thoughts as he does his pencil. The act of writing makes the interior thought become a material object, become exterior. It is by this process that Malone is able to make some sense of his existence. Malone notes: "I have nothing to guide me. I did not want to write, but I had to resign myself to it in the end. It is in order to know where I have got to, where I have got to, where he has got to."[67] The ending slip between "I" and "he" is significant as it becomes clear that Malone cannot distinguish himself from his creations: there is no difference between where he "has got to" and where his characters have. Without a religious or mythic framework with which to structure his experience, Malone cannot make any sense of his life. He is then compelled to write, against his will, as it is the only way to give shape and order to his thoughts. In an effort to make sense of his life, Malone must establish a relationship between his mind

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[66] Beckett, 189.
[67] Ibid., 208.

and the external world. The difficulty of the task then becomes temporally complicated, as he has no knowledge of his origins and no way of establishing a timeline for his life.

This loss of temporality can be attributed in part to his loss of ability to distinguish present from past and also to the breakdown of novelistic structure. Malone cannot establish a beginning for himself because is life is so wrapped up in his writing. Malone notes: "It's vague, life and death. I must have had my little private idea on the subject when I began, otherwise I would not have begun, I would have held my peace, I would have gone on peacefully being bored to howls, having my little fun and games with the cones and cylinders…until someone was kind enough to come and coffin me."[68] Interesting here is Malone's comment that in order to begin he must have some idea of life and death; otherwise he would not have started writing. The process of creation is linked to beginning but is also predicated on an anticipated end. The act of "beginning" (presumably beginning to write) results in a clearer definition of self but the more Malone writes, the more this distinction becomes confused. If he had not begun to write, he would have remained blissfully unaware of the separation between life and death until he died and was put into a coffin. There is a humorous aspect to the notion of someone being "kind" enough to "coffin" Malone that is evocative of traditional Irish wake tradition that featured games alongside mourning rituals. Indeed, Mercier links the "Irish propensity for macabre humor" to Irish wakes "at which merriment alternates with or triumphs

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[68] Ibid., 225.

over mourning, in the very presence of the corpse."[69] Malone's alternation between death and play mirrors this process, situating him in an Irish tradition of using humor as a way of accommodating death.

However, this blurring of boundaries created by play is problematic for Malone who cannot determine what is real or what is fiction. His sense that nothing exists or inexists can be read as an effort to destroy consciousness. Levy has noted: "But if, as Malone claims, 'Nothing is more real than nothing' (192) and the preeminent object of consciousness is therefore nothing, then consciousness itself cannot be distinguished from a vacuum."[70] Levy's contention here is that consciousness cannot exist if nothing exists within it, if there is no sense of self and other. At first, this paring away of consciousness might appear a problematic assertion in a narrative that is itself so self-conscious. However, as Levy contends, it is in fact through Malone's attention to himself and his state of "[…] inexisting within that attention" that Malone "progressively evacuates himself of all content."[71] This self-emptying is linked by Levy to *kenosis* or Christ's concession of his power when he reconciles himself to dying for the sins of man. In religious *kenosis*, the self is emptied from its human desires in order to exist for God. Malone is attempting a similar process of self-evacuation of desires, but unlike the process of religious *kenosis*, Malone is not doing this in order to exist for God but rather to relive himself from pain. Levy observes that Malone is caught between the two poles of "consciousness of nothing (or silence)

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[69] Mercier, 49.
[70] Levy, *Trapped in Thought*, 224.
[71] Ibid., 93.

and consciousness of distraction (or noise)", but that the play between these two extremes is complicated by the effort of consciousness to reestablish contact with the evacuated content which results in a struggle between what is recorded in Malone's exercise book and what goes unnarrated.[72] This state of indeterminacy between consciousness and content, between self and other, is not, however, merely a feature of what Levy calls "Beckettian mimesis" or the attempt to represent nothing, but can be read as a commentary on the state of modern man. Advances in modern medicine, warfare and the advent of psychoanalysis have created a pressure on humans both to know themselves and escape themselves, to inflict harm but also to relieve suffering. Malone's efforts to escape his own humanity, to abolish his needs and desires proves ultimately impossible as even after he has evacuated his own consciousness, and freed himself of bodily pain, there still exists the need for narrative even if there is nothing to narrate, the need to understand death even if it cannot be understood.

Instead of narrative serving as a mode of recall and remembering, in *Malone Dies,* narrative serves to highlight failure and the absence of order. The breakdown of temporal order in Malone's narrative is mostly due to his inability to remember and his evasion of pain and suffering through writing. Elizabeth Barry has observed a link between Beckett's and Augustine's conceptions of memory in that both conceive of it as a progress of imagined duration and both

[72] Ibid., 99.

are intrigued by the relationship between memory and time.[73] This relationship is highlighted in Malone's narration as he struggles to reconcile his memory of past events to his current state, always questioning and correcting his own thoughts and observations. Through Malone's exclusion of painful or slow moments from his narrative, Barry argues, Beckett "dismantles temporal experiences by emphasizing the discrepancy between textual and 'real' time."[74] The space between "real" time and textual time slowly diminishes as the narrative progresses and Malone tries to correlate the time of his actual death with his textual death. In the end this proves impossible. Even as Malone attempts to conclude that "never there he will never never anything there any more" and thus end his character's fictional existence, these are just bits of fragmented sentences.[75] The reader is still left with the unsettling image of Lemuel, his hatchet raised and coated in blood that will never dry. Malone's pencil, his paper, his time and ability to write run out before he gets the chance to narrate an end to Lemuel.

Malone Dies is Malone's attempt to purge himself of human desires in an effort to empty himself, creating a narrative with an absent center. However, Malone ultimately fails in his project of self-annihilation or oblivion, as he cannot rid himself of the need to tell, the compulsion to fill the silence. Malone's inability to cease narrating stems from his need to evacuate his own

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[73] Elizabeth Barry, "Beckett, Augustine, and the Rhetoric of Dying" in *Beckett and Death*, eds. Steven Barfield, Matthew Feldman and Philip Tew (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2009), 76.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Beckett, 290.

consciousness. This self-emptying takes the form of words, which in turn begins a narrative, thus resulting in an act of creation rather than destruction. The problematic aspect to this process of creation is that there are no words to contain or express death and, driven as he is by the desire to reach the end of the text, Malone is compelled to expel words in an effort to express the experience of death.

VI.

Setting himself against religious and novelistic rules of dying, Malone seeks to narrate his own process of dying and to control the moment of his own death. Yet, as he soon realizes, death itself is a state of formlessness, of silence; it is that which defies representation. Malone's project of self-annihilation is therefore doomed to fail as, despite his best efforts, he cannot rid himself of the compulsion to narrate or the persistent human need for meaning and for hope.

The persistence of religious references in *Malone Dies* alongside notions of death as oblivion or nothingness suggest a disjuncture between the religious and the secular, but also indicates that these two ways of making sense of death are not as disconnected as they may first appear. Even as Malone attempts to destroy religious structures of sense-making and order, there are still residual longings for the order and hope offered by Christian notions of redemption and heaven. In an effort to place himself in some sort of temporal sequence, Malone questions whether it could be Easter Week. He concludes: "If it can, could this song I have just heard, and which quite frankly is not quite stilled within me,

could this song have simply been to the honour and glory of him who was the first to rise from the dead, to him who saved me, twenty centuries in advance? Did I say the first? The final bawl lends colour to this view."[76] This song, that may or may not have been sung to honor Christ's sacrifice, reverberates within Malone and he cannot easily forget the hope that it offers him. Even as he attempts to banish all religious notions from his mind, he cannot suppress his need to narrate, his need for salvation. These desires, Malone implies, are prompted by the fear of death. Malone's location on the brink of absence, between the speakable and the unspeakable, impels his narration but it also reveals his need for meaning despite his knowledge that there is none.

In many ways, *Malone Dies* is the opposite of the *bildungsroman,* which depicts the moral and psychological development of a character from adolescence to adulthood, and instead depicts a process of unraveling or unmaking. Beckett's novel is neither a manual on how to die nor a novel that describes a coming into being but is rather, an exercise in representing the process of dying. In *Resisting Representation*, Elaine Scarry discusses the problems involved in representing physical pain and death. She argues that any given subject resists representation, forcing the writer to alter sentence structure to accommodate this resistance, in essence shaping the writing around the resisting subject. In the case of Becket's narratives, she argues, intentional objects are eliminated in order to draw attention to the universal human condition. She notes: "Given complexity and uncertainty, Beckett, in effect, clears the boards and begins again with those things about

[76]Ibid., 32.

which we can be certain. Each of his works isolates and bestows visibility on modes of feeling, thinking, and acting that collectively constitute the central human experience."[77] The structure of *Malone Dies* is shaped around the unknowable and unrepresentable subject of death. Malone's efforts to narrate this experience involve words and novelistic structures that have traditionally used death as a boundary to contain human experience and endow it with meaning. Malone's invocations of religious imagery work to both reveal the human need for these devices to structure experience and offer hope, and at the same time emphasize how pointless these efforts are.

In the novel, death traditionally functions as a narrative limit, a way of revealing the boundaries that contain and give meaning to life. As is evident from both Joyce's *Ulysses* and O'Brien's *The Ante-Room,* the Irish novel tradition rejects this idea of death as a final boundary that provides closure and fixes meaning in place. Instead, these novels connect death with birth and the beginnings of life. Novelistic narrative serves as a way of bringing together the living and the dead, the religious and the secular, and of challenging the distinction between these binaries. Like Joyce and O'Brien before him, Beckett uses the novel form to critique religious conceptions of death and the way that these attitudes limit and restrict life. Far from serving as an outright condemnation of Christianity, Beckett seeks to understand what happens to our conceptions of death when these structures are removed.

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[77] Elaine Scary, *Resisting Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 92.

In *Malone Dies* Beckett reverses the notion of death as limit or boundary and uses it to destroy the rituals that hold meaning in place. What is revealed is that the need for narrative and for the consolation provided by Christianity persists, even when hope appears to be gone. Without the structures of beginning and ending and the notion of heaven to offer hope, life becomes both meaningless and indefinite. In its portrayal of a man caught between religious notions of salvation and modern notions of godlessness, *Malone Dies* depicts the troubled state of modern humans. At the same time, Beckett's use of macabre humor defends against a sense of utter hopelessness. Malone's very attempt to end himself through his writing is darkly humorous because it is impossible. Despite his efforts to construct a plot that he can follow, Malone's story cannot be told in a straightforward narrative, but functions in a discursive, fragmented way. We shall find that while Irish novelists such as John McGahern seem to piece the novel form back together, he retains Beckett's sense of hollowed-out subjectivity and meaningless rituals. Whereas Beckett portrays the excruciating state of inexistence and the inability to truly die as both comic and tragic, McGahern sees death as the only reality. *The Barracks* returns to the theme of the dying mother and depicts an Ireland in which the rituals of Catholicism dominate daily life but have become meaningless. Narrative offers the promise of expression and therefore relief from suffering, but fails to alter society or to undo the constructs of reality. Beckett's darkly humorous tale of a man who cannot escape himself and therefore cannot die, becomes, for McGahern, a grim reality where death threatens to destroy meaning and order but ultimately fails to provoke change.

Chapter 4

Ritual and Denial in a World Stripped of Illusion: John McGahern's *The Barracks*

I.

In his memoir, *All Will be Well,* John McGahern wrote: "Those who are dying are marked not only by themselves but by the world they are losing. They have become the other people who die and threaten the illusion of endless continuity."[1] Written after his own diagnosis with cancer, this quotation reveals McGahern's attitude towards dying but also describes the way it is depicted in his fiction. The prospect of death endows the individual with a particular vision, an ability to appreciate the beauty of the world but also to view that world realistically — stripped of illusion. His first published novel, *The Barracks* (1963), tells the story of Elizabeth Reegan, a woman dying of breast cancer in the rural West of Ireland in the late nineteen-forties. She lives in the police barracks with her husband Reegan, a severe and emotionally distant police sergeant, and his children from his first marriage. The novel's depictions of Elizabeth's struggle to accept death and her process of dying are distinctly similar to other novels in this study in that they feature a conflict between Catholic notions of heaven and secular views of death as oblivion; a preoccupation with purgatory and with suffering; and a reliance on death to reveal the underlying structures of narrative. McGahern's novel, however, is unique in that it binds the concerns of the dying with those of the living, depicting a society that destroys and renews itself in a

[1] John McGahern. *All Will Be Well: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), 125. This quotation was cited in McGahern's obituary in 2006 in *The Guardian.* The book was published in Ireland and the UK simply under the title *Memoir*.

cycle of repetition. While rituals protect the illusion of continuity, McGahern's depictions of Elizabeth's physical pain establish death as the ultimate definer of a reality characterized by disjuncture.

In McGahern's fictions death becomes the ultimate manifestation of reality, a manifestation that when denied results in a traumatized sense of the past which continues to haunt the present. *The Barracks* returns to the theme of the dead or dying mother so apparent in the novels of Joyce, O'Brien and Beckett and describes the process of dying from her point of view. In no earlier fiction do we experience the mother's death from so close and intimate a vantage point. Though Elizabeth has no children of her own, she features in McGahern's novel as a mother figure for Reegan's children from his first marriage. Rather than serving as a haunting reminder of the past, as in *Ulysses*, or as a symbol of a way of life that is dying as in *The Ante-Room,* McGahern's Elizabeth is a strong and independent woman whose life has been equally influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church and by existentialist notions of death as nothingness. As she faces death, Elizabeth struggles to establish her own identity and to find meaning in life. In this sense, Elizabeth resembles Beckett's Malone as she attempts to define herself against physical objects and to establish a sense of self, while at the same time wanting to escape the self-enclosing confines of her own mind. This comparison with Beckett is particularly important to an understanding of Elizabeth's failed attempts at creation and will be further developed later in the chapter. The plot of *The Barracks* is driven by Elizabeth's imminent death and increasing urgency to make sense of her life before she dies. Elizabeth's

memories of the past divert the novel's forward movement, sending it backwards. It is these memories that enrich Elizabeth's present life and provide the novel's central conflict between existentialist notions of authenticity and freedom and the Catholic beliefs that bind her to her family and social world.

From the outset of the novel, Elizabeth is anxious and preoccupied by the lump in her breast, fearing the worst. Her diagnosis of cancer early in the novel confirms these fears and results in a narrative focus on her thoughts and memories of the past as she remembers her time as a nurse during the Second World War, where she met and fell in love with a young doctor named Michael Halliday who exposed her to existentialist ideas about the nature of life and death. McGahern's depiction of death and dying, as seen from Elizabeth's perspective, highlights a conflict between the human need for ritual and for meaning and the existential notion that life is ultimately meaningless. In *The Barracks*, McGahern dramatically yokes together a naturalist depiction of the oppressive social conditions of Irish life in the nineteen-forties and fifties with Elizabeth's intense, internalized, subjective narrative in order to highlight the rift between social reality and individual consciousness. While McGahern's fiction does not offer a solution to this dilemma, it does suggest that it is the individual vision of the world and acceptance of death that gives life meaning. Rituals may normalize death and make it bearable, but there is a danger associated with concealing death's traumatic impact. For McGahern, narrative possesses the possibility of creating meaning through the expression of an individual vision, even if that vision cannot ultimately alter reality.

Throughout the novel, as Elizabeth gradually begins to accept death, her life becomes more meaningful, awakening within her a desire to express or capture her perceptions of the world around her. The great tragedy of *The Barracks* is that Elizabeth's vision of beauty dies with her since she cannot translate it into the social world around her; that social world cannot accommodate her sense of things. It is significant that *The Barracks* continues beyond Elizabeth's death, suggesting that death has not released the narrative tensions but merely exposed them. Unlike Beckett's dismantling of narrative to reveal its drives and structures, McGahern relies on the structures and foundations of narrative to offer a social critique. He uses the account of Elizabeth's illness to express hidden truths and unspoken emotions. The third person omniscient narrative perspective employed by McGahern allows him to depict not only the inner workings of Elizabeth's consciousness but the perspective of the other characters who live in the barracks, including her husband Reegan, whose own worries and concerns provide a wider view of life in rural Ireland. This technique emphasizes the limits of narrative and the unknowable nature of death that is concealed in the chores of everyday life. The threat of death challenges the boundaries of Elizabeth's world. No longer is she able to exist, wrapped up in the needs of others, unconscious of herself and "whatever beauty had been left her," as she is at the beginning of the novel.[2] The pain and physical suffering she must endure separates her from all that, forcing her to define her identity and beliefs.

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[2] John McGahern, *The Barracks* (London: Faber and Faber), 32.

At the center of *The Barracks* is Elizabeth's conflict between her knowledge that death is the end, the ultimate definer of reality — a painful but necessary disjuncture in the cycle of life — and the desire to believe in a Christian heaven which she initially finds comforting, with its promise of continuance and continuity. This theme of continuity is apparent at the end of the novel where there is a description of the funeral and burial rituals that follow Elizabeth's death as well as an account of the lives of Reegan and the children after her burial. The event of death functions as a trauma or point of rupture in the novel's plot but the plot continues on despite the loss of Elizabeth's central voice.[3] However, as the traumatic element of the novel, namely Elizabeth's death, does not occur until the end of the book, the focus of this chapter is primarily on how the prospect of death shapes the way that the novel is structured and the way that bodily pain is represented. This focus will allow for a deeper understanding of the source of trauma, of the way that death becomes traumatic rather than exploring its traumatic effects. The bodily pain associated with dying is even more pronounced in McGahern's novel than in *The Ante-Room* or *Malone Dies* in the sense that Elizabeth cannot express herself or her pain in writing as Malone can, nor is the pain described at a distance as it is in O'Brien's novel where Agnes observes her

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[3] Dermot McCarthy, *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2010), 77. McCarthy has also commented on the novel's final scene which, he agues, functions not so much to "close the narrative circle" as to "draw attention to the emptiness now at its centre: the echo of the beginning accentuates the hollowness of the family without the mother-figure present." While McCarthy uses this interpretation to suggest that it is the mother who functions as the "absent presence" in McGahern's fiction, I would like to suggest that this closing scene is indicative of a wider social problem stemming from a modern desire to move on from the past without working through its traumas.

mother's physical suffering but only experiences it second hand. McGahern's narrative becomes a way for Elizabeth's life to gain expression, thus providing readers not only with a deeper understanding of physical pain but also offering an example of how pain often deprives its victims of language, robbing them of their powers of expression. In her book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry has suggested that the problem of representing pain, both physical and mental, stems from its very inexpressibility, causing pain to become a tool of both creation and destruction. Scarry further develops this argument, suggesting that the human power to create is the result of the intentional relationship between pain and imagination; it is a person's ability to imagine pain that makes it an active force in self-creation.[4] In *The Barracks,* Elizabeth is continually denied expression of her emotions and must instead find an outlet for self-expression through prayer and ritual. She occupies a liminal space between the desire to express or narrate her own feelings and society's denial and repression of these feelings. Her physical pain shatters Elizabeth's connection with her social world, forcing her to assess her life and to construct a sense of self. The emotional pain of death is the ultimate reality that, because denied and diverted into ritual, continues to haunt the society that refuses its expression. Rather than simply rejecting ritual and its ability to give structure and meaning to life, McGahern is instead stressing that the reality of death must be confronted and that doing so enhances our capacity to live well.

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[4] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

The theme of death and particularly the trope of the dying or dead mother is one that McGahern returns to again and again. McGahern's first two novels, *The Barracks* and *The Dark*, deal with representations of the towering figures that shaped his early life experiences: his mother and father.[5] There are intriguing similarities between McGahern's fictional depictions of mothers and fathers and his own life. This connection between McGahern's life and his fiction was further strengthened by the publication of his autobiography, *All Will be Well*, in 2005, which describes his own troubled relationship with his father and close connection with his mother. After his mother's death from cancer when McGahern was nine, he was sent to live with his father in the police barracks. McGahern was not allowed to attend his mother's funeral and was forced to leave the home he shared with her several days before her death. In the memoir McGahern poignantly describes how on the day of his mother's funeral he watched the clock and imagined the rituals of the funeral, going so far as to envision the four candles being lit around her coffin and the Latin incantations that accompanied the ceremony. He writes that he "followed the Mass from movement to movement, holding the clock in my hands, weeping."[6] This event obviously had a traumatic impact on McGahern's life and it is particularly

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[5] McCarthy, 23. McCarthy argues that the death of McGahern's is the defining moment not only in his early life but in his entire fictional *oeuvre*. Fiction writing was his way of working through the trauma of his mother's death as well as what McCarthy describes as his subsequent entrapment in a "jail cell," referring to life with his father. This reading of his fiction through the conception of McGahern as a trauma victim, while intriguing, offers little insight into the way that death as trauma functions in the texts themselves.

[6] McGahern, *All Will be Well,* 141.

significant that he reenacts the funeral ceremony by imagining its rituals, as he will later recreate similar scenes in his fiction.

The painful impact of a mother's death features not only in *The Barracks* and in *The Dark*, where young Mahoney's mother has also died from cancer, but also in *Amongst Women* where Moran's first wife is dead; in *The Leavetaking* in which the protagonist's mother dies in a scene very similar to the one described in *All Will be Well*; and in *The Pornographer* where the protagonist visits his dying aunt in the hospital. McGahern's early loss of his mother has a particularly devastating impact on him because of the fact that it was an "invisible death" in that it was kept from him and his brothers and sisters, and relegated to the private rooms of their old home, illustrating what Philippe Ariès would call part of modern society's "denial of death."[7] The trauma of his mother's death and the denial of his ability to properly mourn her loss strongly shaped McGahern's imagination and creativity. Dermot McCarthy cites the event of his mother's death and the guilt he felt at not living up to his promise of becoming a priest, as well as his incomplete farewell to her, as the forces driving McGahern's need to create narrative fiction.[8] The suggestion that this need to narrate arises from an early trauma is useful in a further examination of the way that death functions as a force driving plot and narrative. However, it is problematic to attempt, as

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[7] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death,* trans. Helen Weaver. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 595. Ariès is deeply critical of what he views as modern society's denial of death in which the dying and dead are removed from daily life, offering little opportunity to grieve or mourn. Important here is the idea that modern death gave birth to two beliefs: that nature seemed to eliminate death and that technology would replace nature and eliminate death more surely.
[8] McCarthy, 10.

McCarthy does, to project McGahern's creative impetus as a writer onto his fictional characters as if their desires and his were one and the same. Nevertheless, McGahern's traumatic experience with death is useful to our understanding of the structure and narrative perspective of *The Barracks*. McGahern's choice of an omniscient narrator highlights the problems involved in narrating death and representing physical pain. While death compels narrative, it also defies representation. The physical pain involved in dying as well as the restrictions placed on her by society limit Elizabeth's power of expression. The story cannot be told solely from her point of view because she does not have the means to narrate it fully.

The Barracks is unique in McGahern's *oeuvre* as it does not simply depict the after effects of the loss of the mother, but rather, offers the story from her perspective. As such, McGahern's novel offers a glimpse into McGahern's creative imagination as well as offering insights into the way that death functioned in Irish society at the time. As Joe Cleary has rightly noted, *The Barracks* reveals the "fundamental structure of feeling" that "shapes McGahern's imaginative world; a traumatized sense that death is always the ultimate and most visceral reality, and that an emotionally assimilated acceptance of one's own transience, and that of others, will afford the only decent response to this condition."[9] McGahern's depiction of a dying woman in rural Ireland reveals something fundamental about Irish cultural attitudes towards death, suggesting

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[9] Joe Cleary, "This Thing of Darkness: Conjectures on Irish Naturalism", *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2006), 159.

that death as a final end must be both acknowledged and accepted. Elizabeth is surrounded by people who do not want to face death and choose to ignore the fact that she is dying until it is too late. They then bury themselves in ritual in order to escape the harsh reality of death, promoting a false sense of continuity between life and death. McGahern's portrayal of death has a dramatic impact on the reader, ending with a sense that death is not only the most ultimate reality but that the concealed and hidden nature of this reality results in a trauma — a break in time's continuity — that is bound to be repeated. Rather than focusing on McGahern's own processing of trauma or his creative imagination, the goal here is to focus on the way Elizabeth's dying is portrayed; how death compels her narrative and how bodily pain shapes its expression.

Situating *The Barracks* within a larger Irish novelistic tradition of writing about death reveals the ways that McGahern is challenging modern attitudes towards dying and the end of life. Rather than attempting to incorporate death into life, McGahern is using the break or rupture that death creates to challenge assumptions about the nature of life and death. As David Malcolm has noted, much of the critical analysis of McGahern's work has tended to focus on the relationship of the individual to the greater Irish community or on debates as to whether his view is ultimately pessimistic or optimistic or whether his work can be seen as experimental or traditionally realist. By contrast, this chapter will discuss the relationship between death and narrative in *The Barracks*, suggesting that narrative telling becomes a way of revealing the tensions and traumas that pervade Irish society more broadly. McGahern's depiction of death as trauma has

important implications for Irish society, highlighting the need for ritual while concurrently warning of its dangers. For McGahern, the denial of death and the tendency to bury the pain of loss in ritual further serves to perpetuate suffering by promoting an illusion of continuity. Narrative offers a way of expressing suffering and of understanding grief, even if it does not always alter reality.

When *The Barracks* was published in 1963, it was generally well received and marked McGahern's arrival on the Irish literary scene, winning him a McCauley fellowship. In her review of the novel in the *University Review* in 1964, Kate O'Brien comments on the simplicity of the story's outline and on McGahern's concern with the unities of place, time and theme. She identifies the place as a Garda barracks in Co. Roscommon, the time as a single year around 1950, and the theme as family life and love in relation to death.[10] These "simple" outlining features of McGahern's novel remind the reader of the specific social context in which this story is set and of the ways in which these factors all contribute to Elizabeth's attitude towards death. O'Brien's one criticism is that Elizabeth's philosophical reflections do not seem quite within the reach of her "simple form of consciousness."[11] O'Brien's suggestion that Elizabeth should be incapable of such sophisticated thought is interesting as it highlights the contrast

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[10] Kate O'Brien, "Untitled Review" *University Review* 3 no. 4 (Spring, 1964) 59-60. See also, Eamon Maher, "Circles and Circularity in the Writings of John McGahern" *Nordic Irish Studies* no. 4 (2005): 162, http://www.jstor/stable/30001526. Maher has noted that O'Brien ranks among the Irish writers McGahern admired and draws similarities between O'Brien and McGahern's novels. He agues that O'Brien's novels mark an end of the world of genteel Catholicism and McGahern's depiction of rural Ireland in the twentieth century functions in a similar way.

[11] O'Brien, 59.

McGahern is setting up between Elizabeth's inner consciousness and her social reality. In Elizabeth, McGahern has created a character whose individual consciousness does not conform to the communal values of the time. Elizabeth's backwards-looking narrative remembers her early years as a nurse in London — a period for her philosophical questioning and self-exploration.

O'Brien's comment is particularly interesting when considering McGahern's work in relation to her own novel, *The Ante-Room*. Both novels feature female protagonists who are heavily influenced by Catholic teachings and whose everyday lives are shaped by Catholic rituals and regulations. Most importantly, both women experience a crisis of faith in the face of death. Despite these similarities, O'Brien's Agnes is markedly different from McGahern's Elizabeth in that Agnes remains bound to Catholic teachings whereas Elizabeth's exposure to cosmopolitan life and modern ideas of selfhood have created within her a need to realize her desires. McGahern's depiction of Elizabeth's inner thoughts shows the influence not only of Catholicism but also of international philosophic thought shaped by two world wars on a woman living in rural Ireland. While O'Brien views the existence of such a woman as an impossibility, McGahern's depiction cannot simply be dismissed as unrealistic; his portrayal of Elizabeth may indicate a shift in the conception of the rural housewife as blindly faithful to Catholicism without thought or question. In fact, it is the contrast between Elizabeth's philosophical questioning and the naturalistic description of her surroundings that makes *The Barracks* such an important novel in its depiction of death and dying.

Critical work on *The Barracks* has tended to focus on the religious aspects of the novel and on McGahern's depiction of rural Irish life, viewing him as a chronicler of an Ireland that is slowly being lost. Critics such as Eamon Maher and James Whyte have stressed the significance of the novel's depiction of a rural Ireland trapped between unattainable ideas and an inadequate reality.[12] McGahern's naturalist account of Elizabeth's illness in *The Barracks* is contrasted with his depiction of her decidedly existentialist concerns with self and subjectivity, freedom and authenticity, emphasizing not simply the inadequacy of reality but its power to deny individual expression. Denis Sampson has argued that McGahern's metaphysical concerns and use of symbolism and rhythm to represent the unconscious displays a distinctly modernist style or aesthetic.[13] Despite the modernist traces inherent in McGahern's portrayal of time and concern with consciousness and individuality, it is clear from the linear structure of his narrative that follows Elizabeth from the diagnosis of her illness until her death, and from his realistic depictions of life in the barracks, that the novel can ultimately be classified as naturalist, a style that ties it to the social reality of post-independence Ireland. McGahern's decision to depict Elizabeth's struggle with breast cancer further reflects his desire to engage with social issues. Brian Liddy has called McGahern's decision to give Elizabeth breast cancer an "active choice" noting the invasive nature of the illness as it attacks her individuality and

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[12] See Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003) and James Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fictions of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

[13] Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 21.

sexuality.[14] Elizabeth's illness not only affects the way that Elizabeth perceives the world around her but also the way that she is perceived, stressing the separation between the individual and society. Liddy has also noted that the religious rituals in the novel do not spring from Elizabeth's own moral leanings but are perpetuated by the community in which church teachings have been so deeply ingrained that most people cannot see beyond them. This insight is particularly relevant to Elizabeth's struggle to reconcile her own doubts, fears and philosophical questioning with the Catholic society that surrounds her.

The goal of this chapter is to suggest that McGahern's depictions of death and of bodily suffering in *The Barracks* do not merely reflect the social values of Ireland during this time but also reveal how death becomes traumatic as a result of its denial and repression. For Elizabeth, death is the ultimate end. The narrative, however, continues beyond this individual life and is thus suggestive of a historical time-sequence that exists outside her life sequence, indicative of the natural life cycle that continues on in spite of death.[15] The opposition between Elizabeth's agonized, existentialist consciousness and her personal, social and familial commitments underline the competing values at work on the modern

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[14] Brian Liddy, "State and Church: Darkness in the Fiction of John McGahern" *New Hibernia Review* 31 no. 2 (Summer, 1999): 112, http://www.jstor.orgstable/20557557.

[15] For more on time-sequences and the historical novel see Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 216-217. Bakhtin argues that the motif of death undergoes a transformation with the emergence of the temporal sequence of an individual life that runs parallel to that of the historical time-sequence. The challenge to the author of the modern, historical novel is to unite these two sequences, finding historical aspects to private life. When this unity of time disappears nature becomes a mere backdrop for action.

individual struggling to make sense of life and death. Employing a naturalist style to depict the harsh social conditions and religious restrictions that confine Elizabeth and prevent her from achieving self-realization or attaining the authentic existence valued by existentialists, McGahern offers a critique of Irish Catholic society. However, he softens and in many ways avoids the absolute darkness, pessimism and misery associated with naturalism through his close-third person narrative that focuses mainly on Elizabeth's point of view. Her perspective allows readers access to the joy and the natural beauty of everyday life, increasing the sense of tragedy when this vision dies along with Elizabeth at the end of the novel. Elizabeth's final acceptance of death is an expression of her own free will, allowing her a particular kind of freedom and peace. The great tragedy of the novel is that her subjective vision is ultimately consumed by the reality of her social conditions. Through the contrast between naturalism and subjectivism McGahern is suggesting that death need not function as a trauma that is bound to be repeated but that an awareness and acceptance of life's brevity can enhance human existence.

II.

In order to fully understand the way that McGahern is using death to reveal the tensions that underlie Irish society, it is necessary first to understand his narrative structure and style. *The Barracks* follows Elizabeth from just before her diagnosis with breast cancer through the progression of her illness and finally to

her death, ending with the effects the loss has had on her family and community. The opening pages of the novel establish Elizabeth's connection to her social reality through her role as stepmother to Reegan's children and also highlight her own lack of a sense of self. The novel opens: "Mrs. Reegan darned an old woollen sock as the February night came on, her head bent, catching the threads on the needle by the light of the fire, the daylight gone without her noticing."[16] This description is decidedly naturalist in its dark setting and grim but realistic focus on a woman's social surroundings. Elizabeth's first name is not given here; rather, the reader is presented with her married surname, indicating that her social identity matters more than or takes precedence over her individual selfhood. She is so focused on her chores and responsibilities to the family that she does not even notice the fading daylight. A page later, one of the children addresses her as Elizabeth and she thinks how "[…] her Christian name — Elizabeth — struck at her out of the child's appeal. She was nothing to these children."[17] Here Elizabeth's own name is a kind of insult that seems to strike at her as it reminds her that she is separate from the family and that for these children she will never be a mother. This sense of her own uselessness is further enhanced by the fact that Elizabeth's attempts to conceive her own children had "come to nothing."[18] From the outset of the novel, Elizabeth views herself as a failure because all her attempts at creation have been fruitless.

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[16] McGahern, *The Barracks*, 7.
[17] Ibid., 8.
[18] Ibid.

The third person omniscient narrative perspective allows the reader access to Elizabeth's thoughts and therefore offers an understanding of her physical pain, as well as exposing her own fears and anxieties about her life. The portrait of Elizabeth created by McGahern highlights her personal failings but, more importantly, underscores the negative influence of her social reality that denies her expression of her emotions. This denial is most apparent in Elizabeth's interactions with her husband, Sergeant Reegan. Reegan is not abusive, but he is self-centered and selfish and does not attend to her emotional needs. When thinking about Reegan, Elizabeth notes: "He'd have none of the big questions: What do you think of life or the relationships between people or any of the other things that have no real answers? He trusted all that to the priests as he trusted a sick body to the doctor and kept whatever observances were laid down as long as they didn't clash with his own passions."[19] The fact that Elizabeth notices that Reegan refuses to deal with the "big questions" suggests that she does not blindly accept the world as he does. The examples she chooses are significant because they pertain to her own illness and are representative of the values of the society in which she lives. Throughout the novel the reader is given access to Elizabeth's thoughts and her questions about life and death and doubts about her faith in God, but these ideas are never given voice through dialogue or written down by Elizabeth. The only way that Elizabeth's worldview achieves expression is through McGahern's representation of her interior private life.

[19] Ibid., 57.

Critics such as Maher, Sampson, and Whyte have tended to view Elizabeth as an artist in her worldview, using McGahern's description of her as a "way of seeing" to buttress their arguments.[20] It is indeed significant that McGahern should describe Elizabeth in such a way as it indicates that, despite the close third person omniscient narrative perspective, she is the novel's primary focus or lens through which the social world is perceived. However, despite the fact that Elizabeth does, at points, resemble an artist in her vision of everyday life and nature, her artistic role is never fully realized; she cannot share her vision of beauty with anyone else. The removed third person narrative is necessary as Elizabeth is too embedded in the social reality of her life to adequately express her own doubts and fears. This narrative aspect of McGahern's novel illustrates both the inexpressible nature of suffering and of death while also highlighting the restrictive aspects of Elizabeth's position.

The link between Elizabeth's vision and McGahern's artistic aesthetic is strengthened by the third person narrative mode, a connection made much of by McCarthy who sees McGahern's artistic vision as interchangeable with Elizabeth's. It is perhaps more constructive to interpret the omniscient narrator as a mediator between art and artist; that omniscient narrator supplies a voice that speaks for Elizabeth, who, deprived of language because of her physical pain, cannot speak for herself. As Scarry explains, "[b]ecause the person in pain is so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain

[20] Whyte, 42.

but who speak *on behalf* of those who are."[21] The idea of physical pain as depriving the sufferer of a voice or power of expression is an important concept in understanding McGahern's choice of narrative mode and the way in which Elizabeth's story is conveyed. The omniscient narrator must speak on behalf of Elizabeth but also has the power to give expression to the thoughts of Reegan and the other characters in the novel. This narrative perspective becomes increasingly important as the characters fail to express their feelings or emotions to each other through dialogue. Therefore, the only way to know how Reegan feels about Elizabeth's illness or to view Elizabeth from outside her own mind is through the omniscient narrative voice. This is significant because it allows a window into the communal consciousness that would not be possible without the close third-person narrative. However, it is Elizabeth's experiences and thoughts that dominate the novel.

Elizabeth's imminent death drives the plot of the novel forward, with each of the novel's events focused on her physical pain, her operation, and on her final confinement to bed. Yet even as the plot progresses towards death, Elizabeth's mind and conception of her self is ever changing and developing. As Elizabeth's life moves forward towards death, her memories disrupt the linearity of the plot. Her memory can, as Liddy notes, "transcend time; it moves in and out of time remembering an array of divided years in one present moment."[22] However transcendent Elizabeth's memory might be, it is important that it is her knowledge of the severity of her illness that causes her to think back to her time as a nurse

[21] Scarry, 6.
[22] Liddy, 110.

during the Second World War. It was during this time that Elizabeth's love affair with Halliday exposed her to existential ideas that there is no God or afterlife and that a person's life only has meaning for that individual. McGahern's focus on individual existence and the way that death reveals the absurdity of life is characteristic of the kind of existentialist philosophy elaborated by Jean-Paul Sartre.[23] Yet McGahern does not fully endorse this view either, as Elizabeth does not completely accept that her life is meaningless and finds beauty and joy in Catholic rituals. As early as the beginning of the novel Elizabeth is aware of her inability to make sense of her own life. McGahern writes: "She couldn't ever hope to gain an ordered vision of her life. Things were changing, going out of her control, grinding remorselessly forward with every passing moment."[24] This passage highlights Elizabeth's awareness that the various changes going on around her are only drawing her closer to death and will not provide her with a true sense of her own life or what it means. As she gradually accepts the fact that she will die, the focus on life becomes even stronger and her experience of the world around her begins to take on a deeper meaning. Though this acceptance of death while also living well converges with Sartre's philosophy, Elizabeth is not fully atheist either. Religion forges a bond between Elizabeth and reality; without it she has nothing by which to define herself.

Elizabeth's past work as a nurse is important not only because it marks a time when she was exposed to existentialist ideas, but it was also a time when she

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[23] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1958).
[24] McGahern, *The Barracks*, 50.

cared for the dying and witnessed a great many deaths. When she first visits the local doctor after noticing the lump in her breast and fearing the worst, the doctor treats her differently because she used to be a nurse, commenting that the knowledge granted by the profession allows doctors and nurses to "face up to the situation."[25] Elizabeth is appalled by what she perceives as his snobbery and thinks about how no one dies better than anyone else. She reasons:

> She had seen doctors and nurses ill and getting well again and dying as she had seen people from every other way of making a living getting well and dying too; and it made small difference. No one was very privileged in that position. Money and a blind faith in God were the most use but there came a point when pain obliterated the comfort of private rooms and special care as it did faith and hope. The young and old, the ugly and the beautiful, the failure and the successes took on such a resemblance to each other in physical suffering that it seemed to light a kind of truth.[26]

Despite the fact that Elizabeth has experience with the dying, she considers herself no more prepared for death than anyone else. Truth, unity and connection to others are found not through religious faith or shared devotion but through pain and suffering. Elizabeth lists money and blind faith in God as useful tools for fighting off death, but notes that pain has the power to corrode both these things. Also evident here is the idea that all life is diminished in the end as a person's failures or successes make no difference when facing physical pain. For Elizabeth, death does not bestow meaning on an individual life but serves to bind together people who, as a result of their suffering, have lost both their material comforts and their faith. Yet, throughout the novel Elizabeth struggles with her

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[25] Ibid., 84.
[26] Ibid.

loss of faith and her fears about death alone, finding no one to share in or understand her suffering.

The fact that Elizabeth remains relatively isolated from her community and that she faces the pain of dying alone is particularly poignant as it contrasts with her vision of death as an experience that everyone shares. The idea of pain as a unifying force has a wider application to Irish culture in general, or at least to the wider social problems as McGahern sees them. Scarry's analysis of the metaphors used to represent pain in Western culture is useful here. Scarry writes:

> It will gradually become apparent that at particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief — that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population's belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation — the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty.'[27]

According to Scarry's argument, when ideologies begin to break down or fail to appear vibrant, real or certain, the physical attributes of the human body will become appropriated away from that body and will become attributes of a cultural construct, lending it realness or certainty. *The Barracks* depicts a world in which the Catholic Church still dominates social and religious life but secular existentialist ideas are gaining a strong hold. This society deprives Elizabeth expression of both her physical and emotional suffering. As a result of this denial of expression, she identifies with images of bodily pain such as Christ on the cross. This is in accord with Scarry's further assertion that the failure to express

[27] Scarry, 14.

pain will result in its “appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power,” whereas the successful expression of pain will work to “expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation.”[28] Elizabeth cannot express her pain herself, but McGahern’s omniscient narrative allows the reader access to her thoughts, which serves as a way of articulating her suffering. In his portrait of a dying woman whose society refuses to acknowledge her suffering, McGahern exposes the way that Catholic images of bodily suffering gain power as belief wanes. McGahern makes it impossible for the reader to view Elizabeth’s death as a necessary sacrifice for the greater good and refuses to in any way ameliorate the pain it causes.

McGahern is not attempting to suggest that Elizabeth’s existential crisis is indicative of the inner consciousness of the average housewife in rural Ireland. Rather, he is deliberately juxtaposing Elizabeth’s inner questioning and past experiences with her present reality in order to locate the source of a larger crisis in Irish culture that he is looking towards. Her physical pain deprives her of any ordinary forms of comfort or relief; it is instead her shared conception of bodily suffering that lends authenticity to her experience. Elizabeth struggles to reconcile her memories of her past and, with them, existentialist notions of death as meaningless, with her present Catholic-dominated reality that promotes a false sense of continuity and denies her expression of her pain. Rather than wholly accepting either view, Elizabeth attempts to find her own meaning in Catholic rituals, discovering in Christ’s suffering a metaphor for her own pain. Through his

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[28] Ibid.

depiction of Elizabeth's fatal illness McGahern is challenging Irish cultural attitudes towards death and dying that promote an unquestioning belief in the afterlife and insist on life's continuity. Instead, McGahern suggests that the individual life must be allowed expression and that it is only through a shared understanding of pain and suffering that the trauma of the past can be overcome and an acceptance of death can be achieved.

III.

From the moment Elizabeth first suspects that she has cancer there is little doubt in her mind that she will die. The hospital visits and procedures only confirm what she already knows. Yet she cannot quite accept the certainty of her own death and when Catholicism fails her, she turns to the existentialist thoughts introduced to her by Halliday. Though she can now understand these philosophies better, she still finds them unpalatable. Remembering her affair with Halliday, Elizabeth thinks: "Everything was stripped down to the bone now and there was the pure nothingness he'd spoken about. Nothing could ever stay alive, nothing could go on living."[29] It is clear from this example that her worldview has incorporated elements of existentialism. She doesn't really believe in an afterlife and knows that death will not confer retrospective meaningfulness on her life. It is also apparent that Elizabeth accepts that she must herself force an authentic selfhood; this will not be given to her by any other means. But even while she takes these existentialist atheism for granted, she never entirely renounces

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[29] McGahern, *The Barracks,* 90.

Catholicism. She may not wholly believe in Catholic dogma nor does Catholicism provide her the comforts of community or common belief. But it gives her something that she seems to value, even though it is not always clear what exactly that something is.

In order to relieve her suffering, Elizabeth becomes focused on the natural world and the changing of the seasons and her observations of nature's pattern of death and rebirth, of beginning and ending, which help her to accept death. Part of this acceptance comes from the knowledge that she cannot control her own fate; there is no way of stopping the progression of time. In a departure from Christian traditions, such as the *ars moriendi* that instructed the dying person on how to prepare for death by ordering and evaluating his or her life, Elizabeth makes little attempt at ordering her affairs or reviewing her sins. She works as a housewife to Reegan and the children until she is too sick to continue. As she considers her own mortality and prepares with dread for an initial visit to the doctor, McGahern writes how: "She couldn't bear to think about it, she'd have to show her own ageing flesh to the doctor, and it was no use trying to think anything, it was too painful, it all got on the same claustrophobic road back to yourself, it was the trick always played you in the end."[30] Despite the fact that Elizabeth recognizes the unrelenting progression of time towards death, as is evident in her description of her own ageing flesh, Elizabeth cannot bear to consider her own mortality because she fears that it will lead deeper into herself and away from the community. She finds it necessary to suppress or ignore the severity of her illness

[30] Ibid., 55-56.

in order to go on with life. While Elizabeth may be able to inwardly admit knowledge of her imminent death, she must outwardly continue as if she did not have this knowledge. Instead of an image of death as a release from the body Elizabeth describes the process of dying as claustrophobic, a sinking away into oneself instead of expanding out into the greater world. There is a suggestion here of the loss of the individual as the self becomes more tied to a shrinking or declining body and remains unable to project interior beauty onto reality.

McGahern's depiction of Elizabeth's moods, alternating between hope and despair, acceptance and denial, is a realistic portrayal of someone facing grave illness and questioning her faith as her beliefs are constantly being revised. This perpetual fluctuation between ideas and beliefs in many ways resembles Beckett's Malone as he struggles to establish his own identity so that he may die properly. A comparison with Beckett is useful as it reveals the differing ways that death functions as a narrative limit. On the one hand, Beckett uses death to reveal and destroy the structures and bounds of narrative, while, on the other, McGahern's portrayal of death points out the societal constrictions that inhibit narration. Beckett, in his attempt to end his character's narrative by dismantling the structures that make sense of life and death, ends up revealing the drives and desires that impel narrative. McGahern's task is in some ways similar in the sense that it reveals the nothingness at the heart of human existence, but it is also different in that death works to both provoke narrative as well as to constrain and restrict it. While the rituals and structures that give meaning and order to human existence appear empty in McGahern's novel, they do still hold the possibility of

meaning and McGahern attempts to restore their value. McGahern is, then, picking up where Beckett left off, revealing the possibilities of death as both a creative and a destructive force — one which compels narrative but also ends it.

A particularly poignant instance from *The Barracks* that bears the mark of Beckett's influence occurs just before Elizabeth undergoes her first operation to remove the cancer. She thinks of how the anesthetist will come and put her into a sleep from which she may not wake. She laments: "Oh, if she could clutch and suck every physical thing around her into her being, so that they'd never be parted; she couldn't let go of these things, it was inconceivable that she could die!"[31] This notion of drawing physical objects to oneself is reminiscent of Malone's inventory in *Malone Dies.* Beckett writes:

> Perhaps I should call in all my possessions such as they are and take them into bed with me. Would that be of any use? I suppose not. But I may…Then I shall have them all round me, on top of me, under me, in the corner, there will be nothing left, all will be in the bed, with me.[32]

Both Elizabeth and Malone seek to draw the physical world into themselves. Unlike Elizabeth's desire to clutch and suck every physical thing in an effort to prolong and extend life, Malone's collection of objects is an effort to end the world outside of himself. The differences in these two characters are illustrative of the inherent differences between McGahern's and Beckett's fiction. Beckett expresses a loss of faith in the world and in narrative to accurately describe that world while McGahern finds narrative embedded in nature, contained and

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[31] Ibid., 119.
[32] Samuel Beckett, *The Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder Publications, 1959), 252.

sometimes concealed by the chores and rituals of everyday life. For McGahern, death does not just compel narrative and awaken a human desire for meaning; it remains a mystery that endows life with meaning.

The influence of Beckett's fiction on McGahern's novel is undeniable, especially in the existential concerns both exhibit. Sampson is correct in pointing out that the main difference between the two authors is that McGahern's fiction is more engaged with the material, social world than the abstract landscapes of Beckett's fiction. Yet Sampson's assertion that suffering for both serves as a way of opening a window into artistic experience is somewhat more questionable.[33] In Sampson's view, Elizabeth and Malone are alike because of their efforts to understand suffering and death. However, Beckett's Malone is not just an artist in his efforts to understand these matters, but also in his attempts to express them in words, to write them down, whereas Elizabeth fails to project her artistic vision on reality. Maher agrees with Sampson's view of Elizabeth as an artist and argues: "[Elizabeth] plays the role of the writer here, in a sense. She is wording the world, naming things, places and people."[34] The problem with this conception of Elizabeth as a writer is that she never finds expression through the medium of written words and her pain remains accessible only through the third person omniscient narrator. If anything, Elizabeth's constant revising of her own thoughts or beliefs can be said to resemble an author's creative process, but this role is never fully realized.

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[33] Sampson, 19.
[34] Eamon Maher, *From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003), 16.

The most apparent instance of Elizabeth's failure to convey her emotions in written words is when she sits down to write a letter to an old friend from the London hospital. She thinks how she will write and invite the friend to visit. As she contemplates what to include in the letter she realizes that in writing the letter she will also be forced to describe her life with Reegan as well as her own diagnosis of cancer and her growing indifference to life. However, soon after she sets pen to paper she finds herself crossing out her own words, unable to accurately convey her true meaning. She finally decides that the whole exercise is useless. McGahern writes: "She'd leave it so, it was a ridiculous thing to want to write in the first place, how could she have ever imagined she'd carry it through. She rose from the table and dropped the sheet of notebook paper into the fire, watched the flames crumple it like a hand closing a fist would, and the charred fragments float in the smoke."[35] This is the first time in the novel that Elizabeth has attempted to communicate her feelings about her illness and her life to another through written words. Her inability to represent her emotions in language is not only frustrating but also "ridiculous," suggesting that it is outside the limits of rational possibility. Importantly, the notebook page crumples into the image of a fist, a symbol of violence or resistance. The image of the flames closing around the paper symbolically represents the cancer that is closing in around Elizabeth's life, but is also suggestive of the closed nature of the society in which she lives and the conventions that prevent her from expressing herself to others. Instead of envisioning the immortality her life will take on through communal remembrance

[35] McGahern, *The Barracks*, 187.

of her accomplishments, Elizabeth sees her life reduced to charred fragments of ash.

The fist of flame closing in around Elizabeth's letter is indicative of her emotional and physical pain. The fact that this suffering finds expression through an image rather than through words is suggestive of the extent to which Elizabeth has been denied powers of expression as pain begins to define her reality. Thinking of how her life can be measured or judged, Elizabeth reasons: "Her life was either under the unimaginable God or the equally unimaginable nothing: but in reality it was no lesser thing; and the reality continued, careless of whether the human accident was a child waking up in terror or two people bored together […]."[36] Here, Elizabeth struggles to come to terms with her condition. Importantly, both God and "nothing" are equal in this instance in that both are unimaginable. Elizabeth is unable to imagine a future beyond death, whether that future is bright or dark. In his depiction of Elizabeth's spiritual crisis, McGahern seems to be searching for a way of reconciling the beauty and comfort of Catholic rituals with the existentialist knowledge that nothing exists beyond life. While these two views are not easily reconciled, Elizabeth's acceptance of death and awareness of the absurdity of human existence not only seems to enhance the world around her but also allows her to find beauty in the idea of Christ's suffering for man. Pain and suffering bind Elizabeth to reality, a world colored and made real by death. Scarry shares this concern with pain and suffering as absolute definers of reality, arguing that the world can be "made" through pain in

[36] Ibid., 59.

that it assures one of earthly reality and is used to mediate power. However, the world can also be "unmade" by pain as it is used by torturers to reduce the victims' lives to a state where they are unable to speak or imagine a reality outside of pain.[37] Both the processes of "making" and "unmaking" that are products of bodily pain are evident in Elizabeth's "unmaking" — her struggle to express her emotion or imagine a reality beyond this worldly one — and her "making"— the new way of seeing brought on by her illness. In his portrayal of Elizabeth's physical suffering McGahern highlights death's transformative power to take away or destroy life, but also to endow it with meaning and beauty. For McGahern, death is both a painful reality but also has the ability to provoke narrative creation, which offers the possibility of redemption from suffering through its expression of an individual vision.

IV.

McGahern's depiction of dying in *The Barracks* is focused on Elizabeth's attempt to reconcile Catholicism with existentialist philosophy, but, intriguingly, it does not endorse either view. The novel begins with Elizabeth's rejection of Catholicism, finding it meaningless and the thought of heaven of little use in easing her anxieties about death. By the end of the novel, Elizabeth has found few answers to the meaning of life and death but she does find her own meaning in religious rituals and their power to ease emotional suffering. For Elizabeth, death is a philosophical question but, more importantly, it is a social and religious

[37] Scarry, 20-22.

concern. Catholicism is important to the novel because it shapes Elizabeth's social reality, a world to which she stands at some remove. Her illness and imminent death further separate her from this reality. As the novel progresses, Elizabeth finds that rituals such as the rosary allow her to connect to her social world, thus endowing these rituals with a particular kind of personal meaning.

Elizabeth's connection with the rosary raises the question of whether or not she is a religious character. Maher has called her the most religious of McGahern's characters in her attachment to rituals and ceremony and in her knowledge that there are deep mysteries of life that are not to be understood.[38] Elizabeth's attachment to ritual is, however, best understood as her way of relating to the life and people that surround her. The meanings she derives from these rituals are not necessarily related to their customary religious function. At the beginning of the novel the nightly recitation of the rosary seems to be a chore. Near the end of the novel, as her illness progresses, the rosary begins to take on a deeper meaning for Elizabeth. She does not pray the rosary for forgiveness or to atone for her sins but, rather, as an expression of her own inner joy. Elizabeth thinks:

> The rosary had grown into her life: she'd come to love its words, its rhythm, its repetitions, its confident chanting, its eternal mysteries; what it meant didn't matter, whether it meant anything at all or not it gave her heart release, the need to praise and celebrate, in which everything rejoiced.[39]

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[38] Maher, *From the Local to the Universal*, 18, 20.
[39] McGahern, *The Barracks*, 220.

Here it is clear that Elizabeth is not religious in the orthodox Catholic sense of the word but appropriates Catholic rituals, finding her own meaning in them. Deprived of expression of her pain or, indeed, of her joy, Elizabeth finds release through the actions involved in ritual and prayer. This suggests that she retains a religious sensibility while also being influenced by existential philosophy.

Frederick Hoffman's distinction between the modern imagination and the religious one is useful here to understand Elizabeth as a character who still inhabits a religious world but possesses a modern consciousness. Hoffman makes the distinction between the religious imagination, that seeks to transcend time and to "will the existence of eternity," and the acceptance of death as a natural end to human time prevalent in modern literature that sees time as an irreversible progression towards death, an attempt to "explore the quality of experience within time."[40] Bearing in mind Hoffman's description, Elizabeth's focus on her daily experience and her acceptance of death are more in line with the modern imagination than the religious. While she finds beauty in the idea of Christ's suffering for man, Elizabeth ultimately fails to believe that his sacrifice grants eternal life. Despite the fact that she does not believe in life after death and is therefore not a religious character in the truest sense of the word, Elizabeth does cling to aspects of Catholicism to make life bearable. Her reliance on ritual and prayer are most apparent at times of physical suffering or mental anguish in the form of loneliness. In these instances she prays in an attempt to alleviate pain and recites the rosary with her family to gain a sense of social belonging.

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[40] Frederick Hoffman, *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 349-50.

Elizabeth finds a particular connection to the way of Calvary, discovering a link between Christ's life and her own. The similarity between Christ's suffering and Elizabeth's bodily pain makes the latter endurable in her mind and elevates the pettiness of her own life to a higher level of meaning. Elizabeth considers this connection: "And if the Resurrection and still more the Ascension seemed shadowy and unreal compared to Calvary, it might be because she could not know them with her own life, on the cross of her life she had to achieve her goal, and what came after was shut away from her eyes."[41] This quotation expresses Elizabeth's desire to find truth through her own experience of suffering rather than through blind faith. It also focuses attention on the human body by making a connection between bodily suffering and divinity, and of the wounding of the body as a way of confirming God's divinity. The cross becomes a particularly important object here, especially when taking into account Scarry's argument that the cross serves as a way of mediating God's contact with humanity. Christ's suffering on the cross, unlike the wounds inflicted by weapons, inflicts pain over a long period of time rather than immediately, therefore depriving the executioner of power, destroying the relationship between power and pain and allowing them to exist side by side.[42] This suffering over a long period is similar to Elizabeth's slow death from cancer that, while robbing her of expression, endows her with the power of seeing. Suffering, then, takes place within the context of creating and of making while also functioning as a way of unmaking or rendering powerless. Elizabeth's inability to imagine a future life

[41] McGahern, *The Barracks*, 195.
[42] Scarry, 213-214.

beyond suffering is indicative of her lack of belief, which, according to Scarry's definition, involves crediting an object with more power than oneself. Despite her identification with Jesus on the cross, Elizabeth does not believe in God's power the way she believes in her own experience. Her prioritization of her own experience over faith would again suggest that she is more of an existentialist than a religious Catholic. Yet, Elizabeth does not fully seem to grasp the existentialist contention that the individual must find his or her own meaning from life and not from other religious or secular sources. According to existentialism, it is the individual's quest for and ability to find meaning that matters the most. In Elizabeth's view, the individual quest is neither possible nor imaginable and this causes her to create a false opposition between existentialist belief in meaninglessness and a Catholic confidence in meaning. McGahern creates this false opposition in order to highlight one of the problems with existentialist thought as he sees it. He thinks that the existentialist focus on the individual quest for meaning must not forget that life is lived socially or communally. Thus, he keeps at bay the existentialist reliance on the isolated individual and seeks some form of communal connection. Here at least, this connection is maintained through Catholicism, which also stresses the communal.

Late in the novel, Elizabeth questions whether she would have been better off had she not met Halliday and been exposed to his existentialist thinking. She then thinks that she might have met someone else who would have a similar influence and notes that her vision had never been the same as his and that "what he had woken in her grew so different that it could barely be recognized as the

same thing."[43] Elizabeth's exposure to existentialist thought has caused her to question her Catholic faith and has taught her to rely on her own experiences to make sense of the world. This sense of things has, partly as a result of her Catholic upbringing, turned into something different in her mind, resulting in the development of Elizabeth's own vision. As she lays in her sickbed Elizabeth thinks:

> All real seeing grew into smiling and if it moved to speech it must be praise, all else was death, a refusal, a turning back; refusal to admit she knew nothing and was nothing in herself, a creature of swift passage, moving into whatever reality she had, the reality she knew nothing about.[44]

The emphasis Elizabeth places on "real seeing" suggests that she has in some way achieved an authentic sense of self; she no longer sees the world through someone else's vision but through her own. The only way to express this vision is through smiling and praise, optimistic gestures that are puzzling in the face of physical suffering and death. Elizabeth is moving from one "reality"— the known world of the barracks — into another "reality" that is death, the world she knows nothing about. Her experiences have not prepared her for her own death, nor have her endless recitations of the rosary or countless confessions. While she can accept death as a "reality," she cannot come to terms with the idea that she is "nothing in herself." Elizabeth is rejecting existentialism here, refusing to simply accept herself as "a creature of swift passage" and instead praising the world, affirming

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[43] McGahern, *The Barracks*, 211.
[44] Ibid., 211.

life and its mysteries. At the same time, she is not wholly religious, as she does not fully believe in God and in the afterlife.

As *The Barracks* progresses we see a diminution of Elizabeth's physical world from the whole of the barracks to a single bedroom. The reduction of Elizabeth's life to a smaller and smaller sphere of experience until the limits of her reality do not extend much further than the sides of her sickbed corresponds to Scarry's assertion that "[…] to have a body, a body made emphatic by being continually altered through various forms of creation, instruction (e.g. bodily cleansing), and wounding, is to have one's sphere of extension contracted down to the small circle of one's physical presence."[45] While Scarry's account of pain focuses on prisoners of war, her analysis of the way that pain is expressed and the way that it is used to control power has a useful application in McGahern's novel. As Elizabeth's physical world constricts, her mind grows ever more expansive as she remembers her childhood home and the familiar streets of London. Her illness and the prospect of death have forced her to reexamine her life, to search for a sense of self, and have awakened a heightened awareness of all that she is losing. In the last weeks of her sickness when she finally takes to bed it seems to her that, "[t]he whole vital world was in herself, contracting or going outwards to embrace according to the strength and direction of her desire, but it had nothing to do with what someone else thought or felt."[46] The physical situation that Scarry describes of a world reduced by pain, defined by the immediate surrounds, describes Elizabeth's situation both physically and mentally. The sicker she becomes, the

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[45] Scarry, 207.
[46] McGahern, *The Barracks*, 218.

more Elizabeth considers her own desires and the more confident she becomes in her own vision. But as her condition deteriorates, she also loses all power of extension out into the world. Her physical pain isolates her from her family and social surroundings because it prevents her from performing household duties but also because it deprives her of language with which to express her feelings.

Elizabeth does not believe in heaven and doubts her faith in God, but she does find expression of her emotions through ritual. At points Elizabeth finds Reegan's devotion to the rosary tiresome, but it does allow her a certain release from herself and the burden of her own worries. The extent to which the rosary allows for an expression of Elizabeth's suffering is evident at the beginning of the novel when no one notices that she says twelve Hail Marys in a row because she feels sick; at another point she is touched by Reegan's offering the rosary for an unnamed "special intention" the night before she gets the test results from her doctor. The rosary beads were given to Elizabeth by a priest she nursed in London and hold a special significance for her. They were brought from Spain and are more than a hundred years old. McGahern describes Elizabeth's feelings just after Reegan offers prayers for her: "She felt the warm wood of the beads in her fingers. They were old and rather rare, she knew, and there was a relic of St. Teresa of Ávila enclosed in the carved crucifix."[47] The association of Elizabeth's rosary beads with the relic of St. Teresa, who suffered great illness and began seeing visions and practicing mental prayer, further indicates the way that the beads come to represent Elizabeth's suffering. The fact that the beads are wooden

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[47] Ibid., 73.

and warm suggests that they are both comforting as well as useful and practical. There is a significant parallel to be drawn between St. Teresa's life and Elizabeth's as Teresa also questioned her faith, suffered from illness and stopped praying. In many ways, this is similar to Elizabeth's own inability to pray when she suffers terribly after the initial operation to remove the cancer. Elizabeth thinks: "She couldn't pray. *I believe, O God. Help my unbelief*, rose to her lips and sounded as dishonest as something intended to be overheard, she'd never made it part of her life, it was not in her own voice she spoke."[48] This quotation reveals Elizabeth's inability to find expression for her feelings in language as well as her desire to find her own authentic voice and beliefs. It is not simply that Elizabeth does not believe in God, but that she needs to experience things in order to believe in them. This is similar to Saint Teresa's life in the sense that Teresa's conversion was inspired by her religious experiences and visions. Teresa developed a form of mental prayer focused on the individual's relationship with God and her writing is unique among mystical theologians because she relies so heavily upon personal experiences that she describes in her autobiography, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila*.[49] The link between Teresa's life and Elizabeth's is strengthened by this reliance on personal experience and on finding an individual way of praying. Rather than being fully atheist or entirely religious, Elizabeth is caught between the two. She finds that rituals, even when emptied of religious meaning, can take on a personal significance.

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[48] Ibid., 123.

[49] Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1957).

In one sense Elizabeth lives very much within the traditional and religious structures of rural Irish society, but its promise of heaven provides no comfort for her. As she gets closer to death, the rules of society and religion begin to hold even less meaning for her, especially in the face of physical pain. The one thing that distinguishes Elizabeth is her desire to believe, even though she knows that there is nothing worth believing in. The unsharable nature of her pain, but also her philosophical questioning, isolates her and deprives her of any sense of catharsis. She tries to tell Reegan that she will probably not recover from her illness but he refuses to accept it. Elizabeth thinks how it was "as if he was afraid that if he shared with her the knowledge of her approaching death he'd be forced in some way to share her dying too. No one at all would help her."[50] What would really help Elizabeth it seems is for others to just acknowledge that she is dying. Their denial is intended to comfort her, but it really only comforts others and isolates her. Catholicism and secular humanism alike fear death too much to acknowledge it. McGahern's novel suggests that this failure to acknowledge death ultimately diminishes everyone. Elizabeth considers how "[s]he'd have to go on as she had lived, alone. She'd have to pretend to believe she was going to get well, whether she did or didn't, and the worst was thinking it happened to be the one thing in the world she wanted to believe."[51] This notion of pretending to believe is representative not only of Elizabeth's relationship to her illness and imminent death, but to Catholicism as well. She pretends to believe in order to maintain a bond to the community she lives in, regardless of what she believes. Yet this

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[50] John McGahern, *The Barracks*, 199.
[51] Ibid.

feigning of belief is not entirely false, as Elizabeth wants desperately to believe that she will live. However, she finds that she cannot escape or deny death. Unable to convince herself that she is going to get well, she must pretend, offering an appearance of hope while her inner despair remains unacknowledged.

Elizabeth's outer conformity and inner resistance to Catholicism becomes even more apparent in the deathbed scene near the end of the novel. Here, the deathbed confessional is reduced to a formula. McGahern does not attempt to dismantle the idea of the deathbed confessional itself—the ritual remains intact—but it is in a hollowed out form. By separating Elizabeth's thoughts from the words she speaks to the priest, McGahern emphasizes the rupture between thought and action and renders the significance of the confessional void by denying its power to grant absolution. As the priest visits Elizabeth's sickbed and administers the Sacrament, she thinks of all the patients she's prepared for the same rite and how this ritual they've been brought up to believe in is ultimately meaningless. She considers how she never let this priest close to her and notes that "[i]n the confessional she put everything into formula. She didn't let him know any of her thoughts […]. Her thoughts had been with her too long, they had changed themselves too often for her to want to change them now because of another's interpretation of a law big enough to include every positive position of honesty; and if her own truth wasn't within herself she didn't see how it could possibly concern her anyhow." [52] This notion of truth being within herself is key to understanding the way that religion functions in Elizabeth's life. While she

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[52] Ibid., 217.

conforms outwardly to the rules of Catholicism to give her life shape and structure, she retains a private world within herself.

As Elizabeth dies, she is drawn further into herself, destabilizing the physical world dominated by the rules and regulations of Catholicism. This awakens a desire to establish her own beliefs and allows her to see the unbounded natural beauty of the world. She cannot envision a world beyond death and therefore has no illusions about a heaven that awaits her. Instead, Elizabeth struggles to establish a sense of self and purpose before she dies. She realizes that by accepting death, her own life and perception of the world have been enhanced. However, she is never able to fully realize this vision or express it. She dies with "her fingers groping the sheets, the perishing senses trying to find root in something physical […]."[53] Without a way of sharing her beliefs with others or in any way impacting her social reality, Elizabeth's life is rendered meaningless in the end, her final attempt at permanence a groping for something physical to cling to.

V.

The great tragedy of *The Barracks* and the cause of the greatest trauma for the reader is that Elizabeth dies before fully realizing her identity and before she has found a means to express her unique vision of reality, the terrible beauty born of her physical pain. There is no catharsis after Elizabeth's death — the novel's supposed climax — as the event of her passing away is reduced to a generic ritual

[53] Ibid., 221.

that shows little of her spirit or individuality. Death, the event that should function as the plot's ultimate realization, a moment of clarity and summing up, is reduced to a ritual that functions as a regressive turning back as Elizabeth herself predicted in her statement that speech must be praise, "all else was death, a refusal, a turning back."[54] Her death does indeed function as a "turning back," a point of return. The last scene repeats the novel's opening with Reegan's son, Willie, asking his father, instead of Elizabeth, if he can light the lamps. McGahern ends with this repetition in order to emphasize how little impact Elizabeth's questioning has actually had on reality and suggesting that death's traumatic impact, when denied expression, ends up being repeated.

The ending of the novel functions as a trauma not only for the readers but also for the novel's fictional society. Highlighting the traumatic effects on the community, Elizabeth's death is described as a "shock"; this is a surprising description considering that the novel was building towards this end all along. McGahern writes:

> After the first shock, the incredulity of the death, the women, as at a wedding took over: the priest and the doctor were sent for, the news broken to Reegan on the bog, the room tidied of its sick litter, a brown habit and whiskey and stout and tobacco and foodstuffs got from the shops at the chapel, the body washed and laid out — the eyes closed with pennies and her brown beads twined through the
> fingers that were joined on the breast in prayer.[55]

The fact that Elizabeth's death comes as a shock is indicative of the level to which the probability of her death was ignored or denied by the society surrounding her.

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[54] Ibid., 211.
[55] Ibid., 222.

Even more remarkable is the likening of the preparations for the funeral to those for a wedding. This parallel drawn between a happy event like a wedding and a sorrowful one like a funeral seems at once to return to Joyce's merging of deathbed with the marriage bed and to focus on the woman's body as a site of both birth and death, as well as to indicate a reduction of life to ritual, regardless of the emotions involved. The depiction of Elizabeth's body is particularly poignant, as it seems not even to belong to her anymore and certainly gives no indication of individual identity. Her hands and eyes are described not as hers but are identified by the impersonal article "the." The only thing that belongs to "her" is the rosary beads, indicating their importance in her life and further strengthening the connection between her life and Saint Teresa's.

It is significant that the novel does not end with Elizabeth's death — the climax towards which it has been building — but continues on for several pages describing Reegan's long-awaited resignation from the police force, prompted by Elizabeth's death and the reckless notion that he has nothing left to lose. In this sense, Elizabeth's death can be said to have some impact on the living and is therefore given some significance. However, any hope that Elizabeth's life and death might have positively impacted her family and community is destroyed by the novel's closing scene. This scene, referred to above, which repeats the opening of the novel only this time without Elizabeth, is a most poignant indication of the traumatic effect her death has had on her family and community. In both scenes the scarlets and golds of the religious pictures have faded due to the darkening night and the Sacred Heart lamp on the mantelpiece turns

"reddish." In the final scene, there "seems a red scattering of dust from the Sacred Heart lamp", whereas in the earlier scene there is no mention of the dust, but the wind and rain at the windowsills are part of a "spell of silence."[56] The scene can be read symbolically with the fading religious images suggesting a decline or questioning of faith and the eagerness to illuminate the encroaching darkness as indicative of an unwillingness to explore life's darker mysteries. Most important, however, is the spell of silence and "their fear of the coming night" that Willie breaks with "visible strain" to ask if he can light the lamp.[57] Willie's fear of darkness is greater than his fear of asking about the lamp, but the anxiety surrounding the question is indicative of the way that fears are often denied expression. Elizabeth's death is the realization of the novel's linear plot but the temporality of the children's lives and of Reegan's is not broken by this death but continues on, suggesting that the significance of Elizabeth's death has been repressed. This repetition is also indicative of the nature of trauma that inflicts a hurt so profound and unutterable that it must be repeated to be understood.

McGahern's novel, then, although closer to O'Brien's in style and subject matter, shows hints of Beckett's existentialism and echoes Joyce's interest in the woman's body as a site of birth and death, of making and unmaking. *The Barracks* contributes to our understanding of death and dying in the modern Irish novel it that it not only offers a distinctly Irish view of death in its depiction of suffering and of a purgatorial sense of being caught between Christian notions of an afterlife and secular existentialism but also because of its emphasis on the

[56] Ibid., 7 and 222.
[57] Ibid., 7.

power of narrative to preserve cultural norms as well as to challenge them. Elizabeth, the mother figure, functions as the central narrative point of view but is denied expression of her suffering, finding emotional release in rituals that take on a personal meaning for her while also connecting her with the larger community. The threat of death provokes Elizabeth to question the purpose of human existence and notions of heaven and eternity. The introduction of death as trauma at the end of *The Barracks* is important as it demonstrates how death regulates narrative, and, more importantly, how it reveals the hidden or repressed narratives that, when expressed in novel form, have the power to both capture and challenge society's conceptions of death.

This notion of narrative as a way of expressing the physical and emotional pain of death and loss that inflicts a traumatic wound in Irish society finds further articulation in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* whose traumatized narrator, Veronica, must write out her past in order to understand it. However, McGahern is much more forgiving than Enright in his attitudes towards Catholicism and the importance of ritual in coping with grief and loss. While Enright seems to suggest that an airing of past grievances will provide a way of moving forward, McGahern is much more aware of the failure of narrative to provoke social change and acknowledges the human need for ritual to relieve suffering.

McGahern's final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, exhibits a much less critical attitude towards Irish Catholic society and the rituals that attend the dead than his first novel, *The Barracks*. There is a sense in this last novel that McGahern found a way of reconciling the individual and society, of both

lamenting the loss of a way of life that is passing while also offering consolation for that loss. For the novel's main character, Ruttledge, the process of laying out the body of his friend, Johnny, "made death and the fear of death more natural, more ordinary."[58] Ruttledge later remembers how Patrick Ryan ordered Johnny to be buried with his head lying to the west so that "when he rose with all the faithful he would face the rising sun," in accordance with Catholic belief in the resurrection of the dead.[59] Unlike the generic rituals that take over after Elizabeth's death in *The Barracks*, which obscure the importance of her individual life, the significance given to the processes of laying out and burying the dead in McGahern's last novel indicate the power of ritual to naturalize death without denying its reality. In his depictions of death and dying McGahern is attempting to reconcile the individual life with the communal, the reality of human experience with its perceived meaning and significance. For McGahern, there are no easy answers to these questions but an acknowledgement of these mysteries can enhance the quality of an individual life. Narrative cannot solve the problem of death but, like ritual, it can assuage grief and suffering.

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[58] John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 294.
[59] Ibid., 314.

Chapter Five

Death without Resurrection and the Modern Wake: Anne Enright's *The Gathering*

I.

Set in Ireland during the economic boom period of the "Celtic Tiger," *The Gathering* tells the story of Veronica Hegarty as she mourns the suicide of her favorite brother, Liam. Told in the first person narrative of Veronica as she journeys to England to retrieve Liam's body and attempts to assemble the disparate members of the Hegarty clan — spread between Ireland, England and South America — for his wake, the novel's plot is structured around the communal act of grieving. However, Veronica feels separated from her family by her grief, her mind perpetually moving backwards, remembering a time before Liam's death. *The Gathering* is a novel concerned with death as a break in continuity, forcing a backwards look on the part of the bereaved even as life continues to move forward. It is this gap between the past and the present that most interests Enright as it mirrors the holes in memory created by traumatic experience that must be repeated in order to be overcome.[1] As well as relying on collective funerary rituals to bestow meaning on life or death, Veronica finds that written narrative can endow personal, subjective experience with a communal value. In Enright's novel the act of writing functions as a way not merely of accessing traumatic memories but of working through grief in an attempt to know or understand life through death.

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[1] For more on trauma theory see Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

In *The Gathering* death provides an impetus for Veronica's narrative and provokes her to interrogate the past in the hope of arriving at the truth. The dead haunt Veronica's memories and she feels morally obligated to write their stories down so that they will not be lost or forgotten. This relationship between death and the act of creating a written narrative calls to mind Peter Brooks's suggestion that novelistic narrative is a way of making sense of death. The reading of novels is then motivated by the desire to know the end, to understand life through fictional death.[2] Enright's novel works through many of these same ideas about writing and narrative as a way of easing human anxieties concerning death, but focuses attention on trauma and on the traumatic wound that results from repressed or marginalized histories. Utilizing the popular trope of the Irish wake, *The Gathering* interrogates Ireland's relationship to death by comparing it with British funeral practices. Enright's depiction of the rituals surrounding death work to reveal underlying cultural tensions between the religious and the secular, the modern and the traditional. Rather than relieving or defusing these tensions, *The Gathering* opens up the wounds of the past, and suggests that the act of narrative can provide a way of healing these wounds, even if it does not compensate for past losses.

Structured around the act of gathering, both of Veronica's family members and of her memories, the plot oscillates between Veronica's account of her current life, descriptions of events in the recent past, memories of her childhood, and an imagined account of her grandmother Ada's life from 1925 onwards.

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[2] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xi-xxv.

Many critics would classify *The Gathering*'s style as postmodernist due to the novel's fragmented structure that deliberately resists assimilation into linear narrative, along with the self-conscious mode of narration, dark humor, and suspicion of the authority of grand narratives. Yet the novel's concern with individual consciousness and attempts to reconcile the individual's personal, subjective experience with a larger cultural history prevent Enright's novel from being easily classified as realist, modernist or even postmodernist. *The Gathering* breaks with what Gerardine Meaney calls the "residual modernism" that remains "integral to much Irish writing and Irish writer's self presentation."[3] Meaney goes on to argue that *The Gathering* challenges the distinction between postmodernism and realism as "the narrative's realism resides in its self-reflexive uncertainty."[4] Indeed, it is Veronica's constant interruption of her narrative and doubts about the truth of her claims that establish a world outside of her own consciousness. Veronica's distrust of reality is in part due to Liam's suicide that works to unravel the separations between the real and the not real, between the worlds of the living and the dead.[5] Death and mortality do not serve as the ultimate definers of reality

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[3] Gerardine Meaney, "Waking the Dead: Antigone, Ismene and Anne Enright's Narrators in Mourning," *Visions and Revisions: Irish Writers in Their Time: Anne Enright*, eds. Claire Bracken and Susan Cahill (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 151.

[4] Ibid., 146. Meaney argues that Enright's fiction inhabits the "aesthetic territory on the borderlines of what Julia Kristeva describes as the 'true-real'; where the outside of language manifests itself in language, a territory which Jean-François Lyotard made paradigmatically postmodern, where that which cannot be represented is present in representation." She further suggests that Enright's fiction exceeds this paradigm by reconfiguring these forces in order to be able to live.

[5] Ariela Freedman, *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf* (London: Routledge, 2003), 8. Freedman links death

as they do in McGahern's fictions but rather work to bring the past into the present. Veronica's description of her life since Liam died can best be classified as surreal in the sense that while strange or even implausible, nothing that happens in the novel defies the rules of reality. Death offers a concept that destabilizes narrative authority and calls into question the nature of memory, of historical narrative and the power of words to accurately convey any kind of truth of the past. Sharing a modernist concern with the complex workings of the individual psyche, Enright's novel exhibits a more immediate concern for how these individual memories fit into a larger familial and ultimately cultural history.

Winning the 2007 Man Booker Prize for *The Gathering* served as a turning point in Anne Enright's career and awakened an international interest in the novel. *The Gathering* depicts an Ireland at odds with itself — at once enjoying the fruits of economic prosperity while also lamenting the inability of this material wealth to make up for past losses or heal old wounds. Enright's attempts to understand Irish culture are striking in that they are made in relation to death: the contrast between British and Irish funeral practices; Veronica's various departures and returns to Ireland; in the depiction of Liam's wake itself — an event that carries with it cultural stereotypes such as drunkenness, debauchery and wild celebration, while also serving as an important cultural ritual, particularly in its affirmation of life over death.[6] *The Gathering* uses Liam's suicide as a way of

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plots in 20th century novels to wider modern "crisis of meaning." She argues that death in modernist literature serves as a process of unbinding.

[6] For more on the Irish wake see E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge, 1956); John Gamble, "An Irish Wake," *Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Literature in English 1789-1939*, ed., Stephen Regan (Oxford: Oxford

disrupting Veronica's life, calling into question all that she held true and provoking in her a need to narrate the past in an effort to better understand herself in the present moment. The plot is dictated by Veronica's task of collecting her brother's body from England. This process of retrieving Liam's corpse and bringing it back to Ireland not only provides Enright's novel with a structure and form, but also proves therapeutic for Veronica as it forces her to work through her grief and come to terms with her troubled past.

As she sets about the task of making the arrangements for Liam's funeral, Veronica is confronted with memories of the past and old family secrets. Determined to separate fact from fiction, the act of writing becomes Veronica's way of accessing her own memories of her childhood as well as the imagined life of her grandmother, Ada. The narrative is written in a style that, as Margaret Mills-Harper has noted, resembles psychotherapy, as it is made up of a series of short chapters that are episodic and not clearly progressive, but ultimately liberating.[7] The narrative oscillation and temporal ruptures of the novel, along with the use of the present tense, often make it difficult for the reader to fix a definite chronological sequence to the narrative. However, Veronica's narration of her grandmother's past remains distinct as these sections are written in a close third person narrative mode, which separates narrator and character by using the pronoun "she" instead of "I," while also communicating the feelings and thoughts

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University Press, 2004), 57-61; Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, "The 'Merry Wake'," *Irish Popular Culture, 1650-1850*, ed. James S. Donnelly and Kerby A. Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 173-201; Seán, Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1967), 282-295.

[7] Margaret Mills-Harper, "Flesh and Bones: Anne Enright's *The Gathering*," *The South Carolina Review*, 43 no.1 (2010):79.

of the character to the reader. Framed by her current state — disconnected from her life by her desire to write her family history — the novel is endowed with a meta-fictional quality with Veronica constantly questioning the reliability of memory. In the first few pages Veronica makes it clear that her act of writing is an attempt to console the dead for the past. The possibility of consolation is found in the process of remembering and repeating with Veronica replaying Liam's life (as well as her own) over and over again. This brings to mind Brooks' application of Freud's repetition compulsion to novelistic narrative. Brooks notes: "Repetition, remembering, reenactment are the ways in which we replay time so that it may not be lost."[8] Liam's death disturbs Veronica's life, and the return of repressed memories provokes within her a need for repetition, a desire to remember. Writing then serves as a way of reclaiming the past by repeating it, ensuring its survival. However, Veronica's project does not merely involve remembering but also uncovering hidden traumas. Imagination, often linked to the future, is opposed to memory, which is linked to the past, and both are used in *The Gathering* to access Veronica's grandmother's history, tying the future to the past and further blurring the line between fiction and reality.

Death, and in particular the rituals surrounding death, serve as ways of exposing the rupture between the present and the past with the act of writing functioning as an attempt to close this gap and to bring together the living and the dead in one narrative moment. As a boundary of all that can be known or described, death endows life with meaning by means of retrospection. Enright's

[8] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 299.

novel is suspicious of the closure and meaning provided by death and, while suicide serves as the impetus for Veronica's narrative, her ultimate goal is to understand the present moment by interrogating the boundaries that fix meaning and separate present from past.

II.

Beginning with a scene of Veronica on the beach with her daughters, where she expresses her desire to write, the narrative moves back to the recent past where she must tell her mother that Liam has died, and from there to a further imagined past: to the moment when Ada first met Lamb Nugent and her future husband, Charlie Spillane, and then back to memories of her childhood with Liam. The plot is split between her physical movement to England to retrieve Liam's body and return it to Ireland, and her psychic journey back to the past. The realization of the plot comes at Liam's wake — the culmination of Veronica's journey to retrieve his body. The fact that the novel does not end with the wake but continues well beyond it reveals the driving force of the novel to be not simply an impulsion to know death but also a will to know her own life through narrating Liam's death. It is at Liam's wake that the past is made real to Veronica and becomes personal, allowing her to access the further memory of her own possible sexual abuse. The wake serves as a turning point in the narrative, since it is at this juncture that the narrative shifts from being about Liam's traumatic past to being about Veronica's.

Death in *The Gathering* drives Veronica's narrative forward in that it compels narration, but it also prompts a backwards look, a narrative retrospection inherent in literary depictions of death. The novel is not only concerned with Veronica's need to know the reasons for Liam's death but also with understanding the contemporary moment through the past and, specifically through death. Enright's novel is littered with ghosts — those of Liam, Uncle Brendan, Ada and Nugent — that contrast with the modern architecture of Veronica's house and with the technologies — a car, a train, an airplane and a moving walkway — that allow her to move more quickly through time. The uncanny appearance of the past in the present is suggestive of the rupture between the two. Death — as that which life is being propelled towards as well as that which causes retrospection — in this case serves as a way of bringing these two temporalities together. In the absence of collective social rituals which bestow meaning upon the dead, the act of writing functions as a subjective way of realizing the deaths of the marginalized as well as allowing Veronica to figuratively die in order to live.

Proclaiming her desire to write down what happened in her grandmother Ada's house when she was eight, Veronica expresses a need to bear witness to an "uncertain event" that she feels "roaring inside her."[9] The need to know this uncertain event echoes the ideas underlying much trauma theory and literature, fitting Enright's novel in a wider British and North American trend of present tense narration (and trauma narratives). As with many postmodern novels, trauma fiction is deeply suspicious of grand or totalizing narratives that ignore

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[9] Anne Enright, *The Gathering* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 1.

marginalized histories and that are told from the perspective of the culturally or economically dominant. Enright's novel shares with Irish novels published in the early twenty-first century such as Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* and Patrick McCabe's *Winterwood* a concern with the relationship between the past and the present and with the way that history is represented and understood. But while the meta-fictionality of Enright's novel fits into wider trends in contemporary literature, the novel is most concerned with the specific way that Ireland conceives of itself through fiction and narrative.[10]

While Veronica's status as a traumatized narrator makes her unreliable, the meta-fictional quality of *The Gathering* endows the text with a realistic quality in that she is presenting the reader with her life as it is. From the start of the novel, the reader is made aware of the impossibility of Veronica's ever determining an objective truth. She tells herself: "I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth. All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden conviction that uncertainty spawns."[11] Interesting here is Veronica's shift between not knowing the truth and not knowing how to tell the truth, suggesting that the problem lies in the expression of truth rather than some conscious or unconscious knowledge. The truth is not contained in objective reality but rather in darkness or in "night thoughts," implying a distrust of the visible world and an interest in the inner

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[10] Robert F. Garratt, *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead*. (London: Palgrave MacMillian, 2011), 16, 17. Garratt argues that Irish trauma novels are both "about and of history" and therefore "situate themselves within the current discussion of Irish historiographical practice." According to Garratt, this rediscovery of the past is necessary to open the future. However, as this study has shown, death in the modern Irish novel serves as a point of retrospection as well as prompting a consideration of the future.

[11] Enright, 2.

working of the mind. There is also an inherent contradiction in her statement that these thoughts are formed from the "sudden conviction that uncertainty spawns" as it is unclear how uncertainty can result in a conviction, implying that this conviction is invented or fictional. Veronica remains aware of the insubstantial nature of memories and imagination and turns to writing as a way of ordering or making sense of them.

The temporal structure of Enright's novel is of particular importance as it allows remembered past, imagined past, recent past and present to be spliced together in the hopes of arriving at some kind of truth. It is Liam's death that allows for this weaving together of various versions of the past and present. As Veronica notes early in her narrative, everything stops for death and it is in fact this point of suspension, caught between the future and the past, which she remains confined to for the duration of the novel.[12] The plot, then, mirrors this liminal position from which the story is told. It is the deviations from this main plot that form the crux of Enright's novel as Veronica's mind drifts back to memories of her childhood and adolescence with Liam and then forward to more recent memories of Liam and to her own life. According to Brooks, the plot of a novel is made up of deviance and error in accordance with Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that maintains that the narratable part of an organism's existence is sustained by the "dynamic interactions of Eros and the death

[12] Enright, 27. On her way to the airport to fly to England to retrieve her brother's body Veronica thinks of all the responsibilities she is leaving behind. Enright writes, "There is something wonderful about a death, how everything shuts down, and all the ways you thought were vital are not even vaguely important."

instinct."[13] This is important to our understanding of Veronica's narrative in the sense that her memories work to divert the plot from its progress towards Liam's body, delaying the revelation of his (and possibly Veronica's) sexual abuse and postponing her reengagement with her own life. The return of Liam's body to Ireland is one possible ending of the novel, and works to reveal the novel's plot to actually be about Veronica's awakening to life rather than simply an account of Liam's death. In this way, as Brooks's theory suggests, the doubling-back or repetition of the past in Enright's novel works to suspend the temporal processes and creates a kind of alternating shuffle between past and present in an effort to bring all these different moments together.[14]

Veronica's act of writing works to bridge the gap not only between past and present but between her thoughts and her actions, fictionally containing her life and making the workings of her own mind visible to herself. Her interest in the past is psycho-archeological in the sense that she is attempting to reconstruct it not through artifacts and objects but through memory and imagination. Noting the absurdity of her existence since Liam died, Veronica comments: "I stay downstairs while the family breathes above me and I write it down, I lay them out in nice sentences, all my clean, white bones."[15] The act of writing separates Veronica from her family and forces her into an unnatural, nocturnal existence. Veronica describes the process of writing as a laying out of bones, suggestive of both the laying out of the corpse in Irish funerary practice, but also vividly

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[13] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*,139.
[14] Ibid., 100.
[15] Enright, 2.

evoking the practice of disinterment when the bones of the dead are dug up after the flesh has fallen away, often signifying the end of the period of mourning.[16] The disinterment of bones is not only related to mourning but is also connected to the archeological project of recovering truths about the past. From the Middle Ages on, in Britain and elsewhere, bones were regularly disinterred to answer specific questions about death or as objects of study for medical purposes.[17] In the Irish context, in particular, the disinterment of corpses is often related to religion or politics.[18] Veronica's reference to her writing as bones suggests that she wants to dredge up a buried past that is not only personal but also connected to cultural memory. The fact that the bones are "clean" and "white," signals the way that Liam's death functions in the text as a truth-revealing device.[19] Yet Veronica is suspicious of linear histories and of a past that is neat and tidy, leaving no room for the messy and complicated aspects of life. Veronica's reference to bones

[16] For an excellent account of disinterment and the changes in the practice in the modern period see Diane O'Rourke, "Mourning Becomes Eclectic: Death of Communal Practice in a Greek Cemetery," *American Ethnologist*, 43 No. 2 (2007): 387-402, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4496813. O'Rourke's article is focused on disinterment in rural Greece but the changes in modern attitudes towards death and mourning are indicative of larger shifts in Europe.
[17] Sarah Tarlow and Liv Nilsson Stutz, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 17.
[18] Lawrence Taylor, "*Bás InÉirinn*: Cultural Constructions of Death in Ireland," *Anthropological Quarterly,* 26 No. 4 (1989): 175. Taylor notes that despite the fact that there is no "cult of death" in Irish Catholicism "attention to the fact and possibility of death is maintained in both religious and ordinary language." The "cult of death" emerges in the political realm. For more on disinterment in sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland as it pertained to power struggles between Catholics and Protestants see Clodagh Tait, *Death Burial and Commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1650* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
[19] Enright, 125. Veronica tells us "[t]hat was Liam's great talent—exposing a lie." Liam's ghost then demands truth and for Veronica to expose the truth in a way that he could not.

brings to mind ancient folk beliefs that the indestructible part of a human or animal — its soul — is found in or connected to its bones.[20] These bones, however, are not Liam's actual bones but Veronica's reconstructed story of the past. The comparison of writing to laying out bones indicates her desire to reassemble the past in a more truthful light. However, the notion of truth is constantly called into question, as Veronica's memories cannot be separated from her imagination. There are no claims of truth or assertions of narrative authority here. Rather, the act of narrative serves as a way of interrogating the past and revealing its gaps and ruptures.

The laying out of Veronica's "bones" can also be compared to the laying out of a corpse, suggesting that there is something unresolved left to mourn. Claire Connolly has usefully linked Irish death rituals to the Irish novelistic tradition.[21] Referring to John Banim's early nineteenth-century novel *The Nowlans*, Connolly writes: "Laid-out bodies of this kind carry the burden of the representation of the past within Irish romanticism."[22] Veronica's reference to laying out her bones, with its connotations of both ancient and folkloric beliefs surrounding bones and laid-out corpses, connects Veronica's narrative to the end of life rather than to the beginning. The bones serve to frame the structure of Veronica's narrative, a structure that she is perpetually re-arranging. The purity

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[20] See Daniel G. Brinton, "Folk-Lore of the Bones," *Journal of American Folk-Lore,* 3 (1890): 18. Brinton explains how the word bonfire is derived from the word bone-fire or in Irish *cnaimh theinne.* This ancient practice of sacrifice involved the burning of man or animal in order to reveal the soul.

[21] Claire Connolly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790-1829* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 164-99.

[22] Ibid., 193.

Veronica associates with death is evident in several Irish literary texts. From the consolation provided to Michael's family by the fact that he will get a "clean burial" at sea in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* to the bar of soap Leopold Bloom carries in his pocket to Dignam's funeral in *Ulysses,* the rites surrounding death in the Irish tradition involve purification and anointment by water. As the body decays, the bones are the only reminder of any lingering wound. However, this wound is not often visible on the bones themselves and can only be known through narrative reconstruction. Veronica's reference to bones also brings to mind one of W.B. Yeats's *Noh* plays, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, that depicts a landscape torn apart by continual warfare, strewn with broken tombs and populated by ghosts. Yeats's depictions of the dead mingling with the living are also evident in *The Gathering* as is the sense of the dead's unrest. In both, the bones serve as a means of reanimating the past, of disturbing ghosts that seek release from sin and suffering.[23] The dead who are deprived of ritual remain trapped in sin. In Enright's novel, death rituals themselves do not provide the necessary relief from suffering, but it is rather the act of narrative that allows for, if not a final purging of sin, then at least a way to ease suffering.

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[23] Richard Allen Cave, Ed., *W.B. Yeats: Selected Plays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 322. Cave's notes on *The Dreaming of the Bones* provide a useful interpretation of Yeats' play as it is linked with the Noh tradition in that it is focused on ghosts "seeking release from passionate sins or errors in judgment committed when living; the past has a terrible hold on their consciousness, keeping them relentlessly poised in an ecstasy of spiritual pain from which there seems no escape." The description of the dead seeking release from past sin has reverberations in *The Gathering* particularly with relation to Ada and Nugent's ghosts.

Speculating about Lamb Nugent and his involvement with Liam on the very first page of the novel, Veronica notes: "I think you might call it a crime of the flesh, but the flesh is long fallen away and I am not sure what hurt may linger in the bones."[24] There is a distinction between human "flesh," which is corrupt and perishable, and "bones," which contain some of the "hurt." The bones here contain a record of the past of which even the mind is unaware. Veronica's words are again indicative of a need to dig up the remaining artifacts in order to recover something that has been lost. However, Veronica's laying out of the bones is not in fact an archeological project, nor is she laying out her brother's actual bones. Her project is, rather, a literary one and the bones she is referring to are figurative bones, making up the structural formation of the narrative itself. In order to fully understand how death operates not simply as a framing device but as a way of revealing truth in this narrative, it is necessary to understand its voice or mode of telling.

III.

A distinctive feature of *The Gathering* is the testimonial or confessional mode in which the story is told. Veronica's narrative style can be situated more widely in the contemporary culture of confession described by Brooks that is deeply influenced by the model of the Roman Catholic confessional.[25] The confessional aspect of narrative itself is directly related to early novelistic

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[24] Enright, 1.
[25] Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2.

relationships with death in the form of the deathbed confessional, a feature of many Victorian novels.[26] In the early days of the Catholic Church the confession of sins was a public act of penance and, as such, was demanding and humiliating and therefore only done once in a person's lifetime. As the confession was privatized and restrictions on its practices were relaxed, it became a verbal and private exchange between the individual confessor and priest.[27] This exchange cannot exist without a sense of selfhood, individuality and self-narrative. Therefore, confession becomes a way of achieving deeper self-knowledge.[28] Brooks further argues: "The confessional model is so powerful in Western culture, I believe, that even those whose religion or non-religion has no place for the Roman Catholic practice of confession are nonetheless deeply influenced by the model."[29] While it has its roots in the Catholic model, this culture of confession is not necessarily tied to religion. Similarly, the novel form, while a product of secularization, is still undoubtedly influenced by aspects of religion such as the confessional but also is instrumental in shifting the power of the confession away from the Church and into the hands of the people in the form of written narrative.

The development of the novel form is strongly tied to the Protestant Reformation and its altered practice of confession which was understood to be a private practice of self-scrutiny and was primarily written rather than shared

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[26] For more on Victorian deathbed scenes and their relationship with modern fiction see: Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 8, 50, 101-2, 142, 321.
[27] Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 91-2.
[28] Ibid., 97.
[29] Ibid.,2.

orally.[30] Ian Watt has further noted that this Protestant tradition of introspection and private scrutiny occurs even or particularly when "religious conviction has weakened."[31] As Ireland's eighteenth and nineteenth century novelistic output is not nearly so accomplished as the British or French traditions, one can expect a different development in the Irish novel, particularly in relation to secularization. In the semi-secular culture of Enright's novel, Veronica's confession is not made to a priest or even to a therapist, but instead takes the form of written narrative. In this sense, Enright's confessional mode of narrative calls to mind the Protestant origins of the novel form, situating her novel in a novelistic tradition of confessional narrative. However, Veronica's confessional mode of writing does not have a religious function nor is it strictly private or personal. Veronica is not only confessing her own sins, but the sins of the community that have gone unspoken for years. Through this act of written narrative, Veronica hopes finally to grant peace to the souls of her dead relatives (including Liam) and also to achieve a deeper understanding of herself and her place in contemporary culture. Rather than featuring a deathbed scene where a character confesses his or her sins before death, the narrative of *The Gathering* itself takes on this function of purging and absolution, with Veronica's act of narrative serving as a way of expunging the sins of her whole family.

The culture of confession described in *The Gathering* is centered on the media and radio programs that feature personal accounts of individual trauma.

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[30] Jo Gill, "Introduction," *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. Jo Gill (London: Routledge, 2006), 1-11, 5.
[31] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley.: University of California Press, 1957) 74, 75.

Indeed, the resurgence in the cultural popularity of the confessional mode not only provides Veronica with a way of accessing her memories (as well as a voice in which to narrate them), but it also changes the way she views the past. Thinking about Nugent's sexual abuse of Liam, Veronica notes the changes in Ireland that have allowed her access to these memories. She reflects on how "[o]ver the next twenty years, the world around us changed and I remembered Mr. Nugent. But I never would have made that shift on my own — if I hadn't been listening to the radio, and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realize it."[32] Significant here is the fact that changes in Irish society have provided Veronica with a vocabulary for what she saw and have encouraged her confession of survivor's guilt. In other terms, the contemporary culture of confession that Brooks refers to has cleared the way for the expression of Veronica's own traumatic memories. It also situates Enright's novel in a larger Western culture of confession. While it does not alleviate her guilt, Veronica's confession opens the wounds of the past as well as the possibility of the future.

The contemporary phenomenon of the culture of confession described above is not only prevalent in Ireland but in England and North America as well. This relationship between death and confessional becomes particularly complicated in the case of the Irish novel, as, unlike the British or American novel, deathbed confessionals were not a prominent feature of the nineteenth century Irish novel. Instead, as Derek Hand argues, individual wakes and funerals

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[32] Enright, 172-3.

in the nineteenth century novel became "a symbol for the death of traditional Irish culture that could be played out again and again."[33] As elaborated in Chapter One, the depictions of death in James Joyce's *Ulysses* mark a transition from anthropological depictions focused on collective death or death customs, to a twentieth-century novel focused on the meaning of individual death and personal experience of mortality. In Enright we see the influence of contemporary Western cultures of confession that assert the authority of individual experience above all else. Yet, Enright is deeply suspicious of this model as a way of making sense of the world because of its subjectivity and its unreliability. Instead, Veronica's written confessional and her imagining of her grandmother's past attempts to extend the realm of experience beyond herself to other members of her family. Veronica is not only attempting to remember the past but is also imagining a past that she can never know. In her depiction of Veronica's efforts to write an account of her grandmother's past, Enright is highlighting the ways that fictional narrative can shape cultural attitudes towards the past through a purging of traumatic experiences.

IV.

The Gathering is a novel crucially concerned with the troubled relationship between the present and the past, which is poignantly dramatized in

[33] Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 149.

Enright's portrayal of Veronica's family. [34] What is particularly interesting about Enright's depiction of the Hegarty family is that while the reader is given lists of their attributes, these characters remain somewhat shadowy and abstract, becoming more caricatures of people than fully developed characters. Enright deliberately describes them in this unspecific way in order to merge the individual with the communal and to show the effects of trauma on an entire generation rather than on one specific individual. Enright's novel depicts trauma's impact on several generations of the Hegarty family and also explores trauma's metaphoric possibility as a tool for destabilizing narrative authority. Additionally, the link between individual death and the collective experience so prominent in nineteenth century depictions remains strong. Veronica's personal experience of loss is linked to wider Irish cultural changes. However, Liam's wake does not function on a symbolic level for the death of Irish culture but rather serves as a moment when the past is brought into the present. Trauma as a disruption of narrative authority also works to destabilize the notion of death as a point of closure, bestowing meaning upon life.

The Gathering is a novel concerned with death not only as a point of telling but also as that which forces a reconsideration or a reimagining of the past.

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[34] Recent articles by Carol Dell'Amico, Margaret Mills-Harper and Liam Harte rightly point out the double function of Veronica's narrative as an attempt to gain personal understanding as well as evoking a wider social consciousness. See Carol, Dell'Amico, "Anne Enright's *The Gathering*: Trauma, Testimony, Memory," *New Hibernia Review*, 14 no.3 (Autumn, 2010): 59-74 doi: 10.1353/nhr.2010.0014; Liam Harte, "Mourning Remains Unresolved: Trauma and Survival in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*," *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 21 (2010): 187-204, doi: 10.1080/10436928.2010.500590; and earlier Mills-Harper reference.

In the novel, nearly all of the characters involved in Veronica's childhood and the trauma she experienced in the past are dead. The fact that Ada, Liam and Mr. Nugent are all deceased adds to Veronica's sense that her memories of the past are somehow fictional or invented.[35] The reality of death and the knowledge that her perceptions of the past can no longer be confirmed or denied also has benefits as it allows her to access the past and any hidden truths it may contain. The persistence of Liam's ghost along with the ghosts of Ada, Charlie, Nugent and Uncle Brendan demands a truthful reconstruction of the past. After journeying from Ireland to England to retrieve Liam's body, Veronica must return to Ireland without her brother's remains, due to British restrictions preventing the corpse's release. On the plane Veronica sees Liam's ghost a few seat rows away from her. As she feels Liam's gaze on her she recognizes how "uncanny and dead" he looks, commenting that the dead only want the truth, "[i]t is the only thing they require."[36] Death functions as a distorting force, blurring the line between fact and fiction while also demanding truth. Interesting here is the use of the word "uncanny" a term that Nicholas Royle has investigated particularly well in his book *The Uncanny*. He argues: "The uncanny has to do with the sense of a secret encounter: it is perhaps inseparable from an apprehension, however fleeting, of

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[35] Claire Bracken and Susan Cahill, "An Interview with Anne Enright," *Visions and Revisions: Irish Writers in Their Time: Anne Enright*, eds., Claire Bracken and Susan Cahill (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 30-31 On the role of memory in *The Gathering* Enright has commented "I mean, *The Gathering* is interested in the edges between, certainly fantasy or imagination and memory, between memory and history and where we let go of memory, where it ossifies and turns into history, where it becomes static, when people die."
[36] Enright, 156.

something that should have remained secret or hidden but has come to light."[37] Certainly this definition fits Enright's novel exceptionally well as the appearance of ghosts (Liam's and others) indicates the emergence of hidden secrets that haunt Veronica's consciousness.

The experience of the uncanny in the form of ghosts is used in Enright's novel to reveal the memories that Veronica has repressed. Royle's association of the uncanny with "a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality" accurately describes Veronica's description of her life since Liam died where she stays up all night writing.[38] The unnatural aura of unrest evoked by Veronica's lines, "This is how I live my life since Liam died. I stay up all night. I write, or I don't write. Nothing settles here. Not even the dust," is suggestive both of her liminal position and of the strangeness of borders.[39] The story of *The Gathering* is not framed in a conventional way, and throughout the novel borders dividing fact from fiction, living from dead are challenged. The narrative moves between present and past, infusing the experience of reading with a sense of the uncanny. Royle further suggests that the feeling of the uncanny may also be bound up with "extreme nostalgia or 'homesickness'; in other words a compulsion to return to an inorganic state, a desire (perhaps unconscious) to die, a death drive."[40] This association of the experience of the uncanny and the death drive is particularly relevant to a discussion of the forces driving novelistic plot.

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[37] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 2.
[38] Royle, 2.
[39] Enright, 36.
[40] Royle, 2.

The appearance of the uncanny not only provokes an anxiety in Veronica regarding the hidden secrets of the past; it also awakens in her an unconscious desire to die or to know death vicariously through Liam. The act of narrative serves to reveal the tension between the unspoken secrets of the past and the present, its completion driven by Veronica's desire to re-engage with her own life.

Liam's death forces Veronica to deal with the reality of the past in a very concrete way. When she returns to Brighton to collect Liam's body, she must deal in the grim details of his suicide. She confesses: "There were facts about the way that Liam died, that I wish I did not know. All the things that I have forgotten in my life, and I cannot forget these small details."[41] Significant here is Veronica's use of the past tense in a novel that mostly uses the present. "There were facts" is in the past while "I wish I did not know" is in the present, suggesting that Liam's death is a way of making a distinction between past and present and serves as a rupture or break in temporality. Veronica's tense shift can be best understood through Cathy Caruth's description of the link between the psychological experience of trauma and the body. Caruth usefully describes how unlike the body, the mind's barrier of consciousness protects the organism by placing events in an ordered experience of time. She writes: "What causes trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time […]."[42]Veronica's break between the past and present tense can therefore be read as indicative of the traumatic impact of Liam's

[41] Enright, 141.
[42] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 61.

death. There is a gap between the past facts and her present desire not to know these facts. Yet these facts — Liam was wearing a fluorescent yellow jacket when he died, he had stones in his pockets and wore no underpants — tell Veronica about her brother's mindset at his time of death and cannot be forgotten as they make the past painfully real. Liam wore the jacket so that his body would be found easily; the stones were to weigh him down. What Veronica finds most unsetting is Liam's lack of socks and underwear as he took these things off because they were not clean. She notes that Liam "probably thought, as the cold water flooded his shoes, cleansing thoughts."[43] Here again we have death, and especially death by sea, as cleansing and purifying. The nominative implies that, for Liam, suicide is the only option, the only way of redeeming the sins of the past. However, Liam's suicide only provides relief from his own suffering, and works to further bury the truth of the past. Veronica's narrative is an alternative to this kind of an end — it is a way of clearing her own consciousness that allows her to re-engage with life while giving voice to the unuttered secrets of the past.

This notion of expunging the sins of the past is confirmed by Veronica when she resolves that, "[i]t is time to put an end to the shifting stories and waking dreams. It is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year that I was eight and Liam was barely nine."[44] Despite this resolution, Veronica is able to say what happened solely through a fictionalized account; her only access to the past is through imagination. She finds as she writes down her grandmother's story that she tends to romanticize the past even as she attempts to

[43] Enright, 142.
[44] Ibid.

record the truth of what happened. The shifting notions of truth and unreliability of memory are problems that come up again and again in Enright's novel. Death not only threatens the illusion of life's continuity, but also serves to reveal the rupture between reality and imagination. The dead function as reminders of the past, keepers of facts, and their appearances serve as an impetus to re-write and reassess.

As a result of Liam's suicide, Veronica's life becomes surreal to her as the past begins to leak into the present. The reality of that past — the truth of it — lies with the dead and Veronica must fight her imaginative urge to romanticize it. Yet it becomes impossible for Veronica to give an account of the past that is not influenced by her imagination or memories or by the present. Though she cannot articulate the reasons why, Veronica has some sense that the cause of Liam's suicide might be related to the time they spent in their grandmother's house and in particular to the time they spend with Lamb Nugent, their grandmother's landlord. Veronica admits:

> The seeds of my brother's death were sown many years ago. The person who planted them is long dead—at least that's what I think. So if I want to tell Liam's story, then I have to start a long time before he was born. And, in fact, this is the tale I would love to write: history is such a romantic place, with its jarveys and urchins and side-buttoned boots. If it would just stay still, I think, and settle down.[45]

In this example, Veronica takes on the role of fiction writer, using her imagination to recreate her grandmother's past. Despite her desire to escape into a romantic vision of history Veronica is aware that it is not a fiction she is writing and that,

[45] Enright, 13.

unlike other idealized views, her family history will not "settle down" into a linear narrative. While Veronica may be aware that the reasons for Liam's death cannot be determined, she continues with her act of writing in hope of finding truth. Significantly, Veronica must imagine a time before Liam was born, and before her own birth in order to know the end of Liam's life.

This sense of the plot moving backwards to a time before the narrative or even before the birth of the narrator recalls Freud's theory of the death drive as a desire to achieve a pre-birth state of quiescence. The function of the death drive in narrative can be best understood through Brooks and his assertion that the death drive is behind any aspects of repetition in a text.[46] While the drive towards the end and the repetition it entails work to move the plot forward, it also retards the text's forward movement.[47] We see examples of this throughout *The Gathering* in Veronica's constant narrative shifts between her present and past, memories and fiction. The repetition of her family's history as well as her own gives Veronica's narrative the ability to move both backwards and forwards because, as Brooks argues, the terms have "become reversible: the end is a time before the beginning."[48] In order to know the end of Liam's life, we must understand what came before his death, before Veronica's birth and before the beginning of the novel. Liam's death is the end but it is also the beginning point of telling. However, throughout the novel Liam remains elusive, known only vaguely through Veronica's memories. Liam's impermanence, his nebulous presence, in

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[46] Brooks, 102.
[47] Ibid., 103.
[48] Ibid.

many ways mirrors death itself, which, despite attempts to know it, remains unknowable.

The Gathering, despite its interest in the unknowable aspects of the past, is actually a novel about the present. Robert Garratt has distinguished "Irish trauma novels" as those that are characterized by a concern with an individual's struggle to discover a catastrophic past and to depict the process by which a character comes to know the traumatic moment.[49] Enright's novel, though in many ways similar to the other novels that Garratt terms trauma novels such as John McGahern's *Amongst Women* and Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, is distinguished by its self-awareness of itself as a trauma novel. Garratt cites Barry's *The Secret Scripture* as "standing as a model for all the trauma novels under discussion" in the way that it "suggests that a narrative of past events can become truly a part of memory, things remembered as over with and finished, breaking the cycle of traumatic repetition."[50] The sense of closure described here, with the past relegated to memory, is something that Enright's novel is deeply suspicious of. Narrative does not serve as a way of banishing or overcoming the past for Enright, but rather as a way of integrating the past into the present so that they are engaged in a dialectical relationship rather than sealed off from one another.

One way in which Veronica attempts to put present and past into dialogue with each other is through her use of the present tense even when narrating the past. By narrating in the present, Veronica is creating a sense of immediacy in the

[49] Garratt, 4-7.
[50] Ibid., 146.

reader — the past is happening again now — while also reminding us that this is a past that is being told from the perspective of the present. The importance of this last point is that the social concerns of the present are influencing the way the past is being told. The sense of narrative as being dictated by the concerns of the present is strong in Enright's novel as it is consciously engaging with prominent themes in contemporary Irish culture including suicide and child sexual abuse. As Mills-Harper has rightly noted: "[*The Gathering*] evokes social contexts in contemporary Ireland (and elsewhere), including the scandals of clerical abuse that rocked Ireland in the 1990s, set forth in chilling public documents like the Ferns Report (2005) and the Ryan Report (2009)."[51] Though they are not our primary concern here, Enright incorporates these contemporary concerns through the impulse to narrate provoked by Liam's suicide. These issues arise out of Veronica's grief, the task of making funeral arrangements, gathering family members and burying the dead. For Veronica, the act of narrative is not simply dictated by the need to resolve contemporary concerns, but very specifically by the need to know the reason her brother decided to take his own life. Her narrative then functions as a way not only of exposing the traumas of the past but of using the retrospective quality endowed by death to make sense of the present.

Throughout *The Gathering* Veronica is torn between the technologically sophisticated present that propels her rapidly into the future, and her memories as her mind runs backwards to the past. These split temporalities are made particularly apparent in Veronica's experience with modern travel. As she sits on

[51] Mills-Harper, 84.

the train to Brighton on her voyage to collect Liam's body, Veronica thinks of how childish and silly the names in England have always seemed to her. She notes how the landscape moves past her but at different speeds as she tries "to find the line along which the landscape holds still and changes its mind, thinking that travel is a contrary kind of thing, because moving towards a dead man is not moving at all."[52] Veronica's journey through the English countryside towards her dead brother is illustrative of the movement of her own life. Travel provides a person with a sense of movement and therefore of progress. However, moving towards a dead man is not actually making progress, as there is nothing to be gained at the end — the man is already dead with no future left to fulfill. Veronica's sense of her own movement hints at Freud's theory of the death drive as an inevitable, biological drive towards death, but also suggests a critique of the rate at which modern society moves. Veronica is searching for a place where the landscape stands still and changes its mind. A landscape cannot, of course, have its own will or change its mind. Trains do not move backwards and Veronica, as a passenger on a train, is moving forward whether she changes her mind or not. The narrative is not simply being driven by its desire to reach a dead man, but by Veronica's desire to know the reasons for Liam's suicide and the secrets of the past and to therefore understand or make sense of her own life. However, the causes for suicide are not easily determined and painful memories of a repressed past must be worked through before a re-engagement with life is possible. The reader's experience of the novel is broken by these jumps in time that threaten to

[52] Enright, 41.

disrupt the continuity of the narrative. Yet the persistence of present tense narration creates an illusion of continuity, fostering a sense that the remembered past, imagined past and future are all contained in the present moment.

As the dead return to haunt Veronica, she finds that her life cannot move forward without first moving backwards. This sense of life and death coming together is apparent in the preparations for Liam's wake. During her train journey to Brighton, Veronica's sister Bea calls, informing her that their mother would like to have Liam waked at home. Veronica is reluctant to adhere to her mother's wishes as she associates being waked at home with an old tradition, an antiquated notion that does not match the contemporary moment. However, Bea insists that it is what their dead father would have wanted. Enright writes:

> Meanwhile, the train chunters through England, clicketty-clack, and Bea talks on, sitting on my dead father's knee with a ribbon in her hair, like the good little girl that she has always been, and I look at the hills, trying to grow up, trying to let my father die, trying to let my sister enter her adolescence (never mind menopause). And none of these things is possible. None of them. There is a line on the landscape that refuses to move, it slides backwards instead, and that is where I fix my eye.[53]

This quotation accurately describes Veronica's narrative as well as her current state. As she moves forward through space and time, her mind moves backwards, making her present composed of memory, imagination and reality. Bea is a child in Veronica's mind despite the fact that in actuality she is a middle-aged woman. This image of Bea in the past is brought together with a current image of their father who remains dead, even in Veronica's memories. There is a sense here, as

[53] Enright, 43-44.

throughout the novel, that the dead cannot truly die and that the lives of the living cannot progress due to some aspect of the past that has gone unspoken. At the same time, it is Veronica's impulse to look back that is pulling her into the future.

V.

According to Brooks, the fear of death, of ending improperly, is in tension with the desire for life, the need to divert the plot in an effort to prolong it. In *The Gathering*, the (dual) function of death as that which is associated with backwardness and the past is contrasted with its ability to impel forward movement. We first see Veronica's fear of ending improperly when she is assigned the task of choosing a casket for Liam. Despite the fact that she has already chosen a limed oak casket, when she arrives at the funeral parlor Veronica feels compelled to explore other options. While she does not remember the mortuary or leaving it, she comments: "But I know I will remember this, the hinterland of the funeral parlor, suburban and pastel: a desk with a chair on either side and, up on a swivel stand, a laminated catalogue of coffins, all kinds and varieties of them, except, when I enquire for the sake of distraction, the eco-warrior's coffin."[54] At the funeral parlor, a "hinterland" disconnected from the facts of Liam's death and Veronica's life, her original selection for Liam's casket is called into question as she is overwhelmed by choices. It is significant that she enquires about the "eco-warrior's" coffin "for the sake of distraction" because this represents a moment of deviation from the plot, an attempt to prolong the process

[54] Enright, 74.

of arranging the funeral so that she doesn't have to face the final end when Liam is put into the earth. When Veronica asks the funeral director about the eco-warrior's coffin, he enquires if Liam was concerned with protecting the environment, and Veronica answers that he was not. This instance is indicative of modern changes to death and burial practices which have expanded the amount of choices available for caskets, services, and burials, and reflect an attempt to match a person's life to his or her death. In other words, death practices have become personalized, focused on the individual's life and commodified in ways that distract from the reality of death as a final departure from the world.[55]

These highly individualized modern funeral practices that are offered to Veronica in England are contrasted with the way that Liam is waked and buried in Ireland. Veronica's descriptions of this event emphasize that it is "ancient" and out of date.[56] Liam himself is described as an anachronism, as somehow belonging to the past. Veronica notes: "My emigrant brother makes an old-fashioned ghost, and when he died, I dressed him in worn-out Wellington boots, as the Irish seventies dipped back into the fifties in my mind."[57] Despite the fact that Liam emigrated, separating himself from his country and his past and

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[55] For an excellent account of how American funerals have become personalized and commodified see Thomas Lynch, "Our Own Worst Enemies," *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief and the Community of Care*, eds. Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 141-146.

[56] Enright, 42. Veronica describes, "Some ancient impulse of my mother's means that she wants the coffin brought back to the house before the removal, so Liam can lie in state in our ghastly front room. Though come to think of it I can't think of a better carpet for a corpse, as I say to Bea; all those oblongs of orange and brown." Here the unattractive interior of the Hegarty family home is the perfect place for a corpse. The fact that the interior is "ghastly" implies a terrifying or frightening aspect to the room that matches the shock or horror of the corpse.

[57] Ibid., 191.

associating himself with the modern or cosmopolitan, to Veronica he is still associated with Ireland in another era. Again, Liam's death is in the past tense and in this sentence the use of the past tense marks a divide between Veronica's mind and her actions, further distinguishing Liam's death as a point of separation between her present actions and past memories. It is significant that even Liam's ghost does not match the contemporary moment but belongs in some way to the past. The sense of confusion between past and present, real and imagined, finds further elaboration in the figure of Veronica's mother who mistakes Liam's wake for her dead husband's. When she tells her children that "he" would be proud of them, Veronica explains: "We know she means, not Liam, but our father. She has got her funerals mixed up. Either that or all funerals are the same funeral now."[58] This blurring of temporalities is indicative of a past that has been forgotten or lost. The sense of all funerals becoming the same funeral now depersonalizes Liam's funeral a step further, making it universal. Despite the fact that, for Veronica, Liam's funeral remains distinctly his, there is a feeling that for others his funeral is just like any other. While the wake rituals seem old and strange to Veronica, they bring back the past in a tangible way that allows her access to personal truths.

The contradictory fear of death and desire for life becomes particularly apparent at Liam's wake when Veronica's husband Tom remembers how Veronica wouldn't go near a graveyard when she was pregnant with their first child. Veronica remembers that this superstition is called "*Cam reilige* which is

[58] Ibid., 206.

Irish for *the twist of the grave*," and walks away from Tom feeling "the shadow of a child in me, the swoop of the future in my belly, black and open."[59] While this seems to suggest Veronica's adherence to superstitious beliefs that the dead can contaminate the future, this moment marks the first time in the novel when Veronica, rather than being possessed by the past, feels the future inside of her. Building on this notion of *Cam reilige*, Harte makes a link between traumatic stasis and another Irish phrase "*marbhfháisc*, which translates as 'death band' and refers to the strip of cloth placed around the face of a corpse to keep the mouth closed in Irish funerary tradition."[60] This ritual, like many others in the Irish tradition, is meant to ensure peace to the dead and to prevent the dead from coming back to haunt the living. For example, in Irish folk tradition, after a person has died the curtains were drawn, the mirror and all glass surfaces were covered, and the clock was stopped. Though the exact motivations behind these customs are not known, it has been speculated that they were done as a sign of respect for the dead. It has also been suggested that these customs stem from a belief that the soul of the dead might be incorporated into something else as it left the body.[61] There is the suggestion here that the dead have the possibility to possess even inanimate objects like mirrors which must be sealed up to prevent this from happening. The clocks have been stopped, indicating a corresponding

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[59] Ibid., 205.
[60] Harte, 201.
[61] For more on Irish beliefs surrounding wake rites see Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí. *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer. 1999). For an account of these beliefs not only in the Irish tradition but also in the wider European and North American traditions see Aiken, Lewis R. *Dying, Death and Bereavement Fourth Edition* (London: Psychology Press, 2001), 137-8.

pause in time. These practices seem to ensure the silence of the dead and to banish the past from the world of the living. Significantly, the dead populate Veronica's world in the form of inanimate objects where car headrests double as corpses and ghosts appear on airplanes and moving walkways.[62] In the absence of rituals to close the gaps in memory, to bind the mouths of the dead and unify reality in one linear narrative, the very line separating real from imagined is dissolved and the dead come to mingle with the living.

What is particularly striking about Veronica's perceptions of Liam's wake is that she views the scene in an abstracted and fragmented way. As she stares at the coffin, Veronica thinks how she cannot see Liam's face properly from where she sits: "The wood of the coffin angles down, slicing across the bulge of his cheek. I can see a dip in the bone where his eyes must go, but I do not get up to see if this dip is correctly filled, or if the lids are closed. This lift and fall of bone is all I want to see of him for the moment, thank you very much."[63] This description echoes many others in the novel where characters are linked to body parts and personality traits rather than being fleshed out and realistic. Veronica does not care about Liam's corpse itself and whether his body has been embalmed or prepared properly; her real interest is in the outline of his face and in his bones, which she believes hold the truth of the past. The image of Liam's body as a disjointed series of angles, slopes and inclines, highlights Veronica's tendency to abstract reality in order to understand it objectively. Liam's wake forces her to deal with the emotions surrounding death, bringing her own buried truths to light.

[62] Enright, 132, 155, 158.
[63] Enright, 193.

Veronica is initially resistant to traditional wake rituals, seeing them as remnants of the past. Her grudging adherence to these rituals ultimately proves cathartic, bringing new and old together in surprising ways. Enright's description of Liam's wake highlights the distinctive features of the Irish wake, which is made up of a compilation of old pagan rituals and Catholic traditions, and as such, is representative of a place where conflicting and often contradictory beliefs co-exist. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Irish wake or so-called "merry wake" traditionally included games, keening and merry-making that served as an alternative to orthodox Christian values.[64] The "merry wake" became, as Gearóid Ó Crualaoich agues, "a central social mechanism for the articulation of resistance — or at least reaction — on the part of the Irish peasantry to new forms of civil and clerical control in Irish society in early modern and modern times."[65] This notion of the Irish wake as a site of resistance to Catholicism begins to disappear in the twentieth century as the elements of paganism and the clerical satire of the mock marriage ceremonies began to fade.[66] Enright's depiction of Liam's wake, where the dead come to life and Veronica is forced to encounter the ghosts of the past, returns to the earlier associations of the wake as a kind of "liminal interface of life and death in the community," and serves to restore the social order that has been disrupted by

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[64] Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, "The 'Merry Wake'," *Irish Popular Culture, 1650-1850*, eds. James S. Donnelly, Jr. and Kerby A. Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 173.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Patrick J. Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience: A Historical Survey* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), 213.

death. [67] The difference here is that Veronica is the only one who sees the ghosts of Liam, Ada, Nugent and Uncle Brendan, and the narrative remains focused on her personal experience of grief and perceptions of the wake. It is not the wake itself that restores the social order that has been disrupted by death; it is rather Veronica's act of narrative that serves to connect her personal experiences to a larger history of trauma.

In the partially secular culture of Enright's novel, there are remnants not only of pagan superstitions but also of Catholic imagery apparent in Veronica's comparison between her grandfather Charlie's corpse and Liam's. While Charlie looked like himself, even in death, Liam is transformed. Here we see religious imagery seeping into Veronica's secular consciousness. She explains: "If you ask me what my brother looked like after he was dead, I can tell you he looked like Mantegna's fore-shortened Christ in paisley pajamas. And this may be a general truth about the dead, or it may just be what happens when someone is lying on a high, mortuary table, with their feet towards the door."[68] Interesting here is the obvious comparison of Liam and Christ but more importantly, the reference to the work of Italian Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna. The painting, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c.1480), was created for the artist's personal devotional use (Mantegna wanted the painting hung in his burial chamber) the painting depicts a grief-stricken Mary and St. John lamenting over Christ's corpse. Praised for its technique, the painting uses foreshortening to make Christ's

[67] Ó Crualaoich, 191.
[68] Enright, 64.

body appear realistic and to emphasize his wounds and suffering.[69] Liam's body not only reminds Veronica of Christ but particularly of a realistic painting that highlights Christ's suffering. Her vision of Liam's body as Mantegna's foreshortened Christ wearing paisley pajamas creates a sense of playfulness and lightens the somber mood of both the painting and the novel itself. Veronica's association between Liam and Mantegna's Christ at once elevates Liam's corpse to an impossible level by equating it with Christ's, while at the same time lowering the seriousness of this association by dressing him in paisley pajamas. The novel is infused with such bloody and martyr-like imagery: Veronica's memory of how she used to cut herself in college, the descriptions of her sleek and stylish but sterile modern home, and bodies full of holes (her mother's, Liam's), all of which lead back to the Catholic figure of the crucified Christ. Enright's novel does not simply condemn the Catholic Church for the problems of the past but acknowledges the role of human failings and weaknesses in perpetuating secrecy and abuse. The bloody religious images that appear throughout the novel indicate the extent to which the past has damaged the present but they also serve as reminders of suffering that must be endured in order to live. The characters in Enright's novel appear to be almost completely secular and to lack belief altogether, yet they still retain a need to believe in something.[70]

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[69] Ronald Lightbown, *Mantegna* (Oxford: Phaidon and Christie's, 1986), 136-8.
[70] Enright, 228. Veronica comments, "Belief needs something terrible to work, I find — blood, nails, a bit of anguish." While far from advocating Catholic belief and sacrifice, Enright presents a nuanced view of contemporary Ireland that is largely secular but in which religious images and icons possess a persistent power. She seems to suggest there still remains a human need for ritual to relieve suffering.

Traditionally, the Irish wake brings the worlds of the living of the dead together in its celebration of the dead and affirmation of life. The traditional Irish "merry wake," in particular, involved a centering of "the life of the community into a traditional assembly with both sacred and social significance."[71] However, in *The Gathering*, the ritual of the wake seems foreign to Veronica, out of touch with modern life and also lacking in the sacred significance it once had. When she arrives in her childhood home for Liam's wake Veronica is told that not many mourners have arrived yet. Veronica thinks: " 'What do you expect?' I want to say. 'Who's going to come and look at a dead body in your living room, when there isn't even a decent glass of wine in the house?' But I do not say this."[72] The Irish wake is portrayed in popular culture as a drunken and riotous affair dominated by whiskey consumption, fighting, poetic laments and music. Enright is playing with this stereotypical view of the Irish wake, setting it against the reality of modern Ireland where heavy drinking at wakes has been curtailed by strict drunk-driving laws and busy work schedules that prevent people from leaving work for two or three days to attend a wake. Veronica's desire for a "decent glass of wine" is indicative of some need to fulfill old customs while at once updating or modernizing that need in that it is wine she wants, not whiskey or stout. After the majority of the guests have departed and Veronica is alone with her siblings, they do find a bottle of "decorative-looking" whiskey and decide to drink it. Veronica comments: "This ritual is strange for us because, although the

[71] Ó Crualaoich, 191.
[72] Enright, 192.

Hegartys all drink, we never drink together."[73] Again, the rituals associated with a traditional Irish wake seem strange to Veronica, somehow out of step with the way she lives her life. This notion is furthered when, having decided that the whiskey tastes awful, Veronica's brother goes to an off-license to get wine. Veronica describes: "One by one we finish and sit, ready to uncork the wine when it arrives. And when it does arrive, we do not toast the dead but merely drink and chat, as ordinary people might do."[74] There is a sense here of the wine as normalizing, separating the siblings from the facts of death or preventing them from having to deal with the past in the manner that toasting the dead may have occasioned. The fact that Veronica notices and comments on this difference is significant as it marks the change in wake rites. Yet, despite all these alterations Veronica and her siblings still adhere to the tradition of sitting up all night with the corpse to prevent spirits from entering it.[75] It is this ritual that has the most significance for Veronica as she must now deal with the ghosts of the past as they appear to her.

Veronica goes upstairs to check on her mother who is resting in her bedroom. In a frustrating exchange, Veronica attempts to draw from her mother truths about her grandmother and Lamb Nugent. Despite her efforts, she fails to communicate with her mother, never voicing her suspicions about Nugent's molestation of Liam. Veronica then finds a box containing all of her mother's old

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[73] Ibid., 208.
[74] Ibid., 209.
[75] Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1967), 15,166-7. Ó Súilleabháin describes how the corpse must not be left unattended for the duration of the wake. Some scholars and writers have argued that the wake was intended as protection for the dead person against evil spirits.

records, including letters between Ada and Nugent, and payment records. It is only after she opens the box that Veronica realizes the repercussions of what she has done: "But I have disturbed the ghosts. They are outside the door of the room, now, as the ghosts of my childhood once were; they are behind the same door. Their story is there, out on the landing of Griffith Way, waiting for me one more time."[76] It is at this moment that the full consequences of Veronica's narrative undertaking become apparent — her story is not simply a narrative about Liam and the reasons for his suicide but extends across generations to all those whose stories lie buried beneath the surface, having never been told. Here, Veronica's narrative shifts its focus from being about Liam to being about Veronica. The ghosts of her childhood become the ghosts of her present life, putting the central focus on her. The function of Veronica's narrative is here revealed to be twofold: on one level she is responsible for exposing the truth of the past in order to assure the dead peace, on the other the act of narrative is a way of accessing her own consciousness, enabling her to get on with her life. The fact that this is a story about Veronica is significant because the act of narrative becomes not merely a way of making peace with the past but of bringing it into the present.

The appearance of the dead on the night of Liam's wake brings the past into the present in an undeniable way, allowing Veronica access to even further repressed memories of her own possible sexual abuse. She comments that the revelation of her own abuse "comes from a place in my head where words and actions are mangled. It comes from the very beginning of things and I cannot tell

[76] Enright, 215.

if it is true."[77] This sense of Veronica having found the "beginning of things" is reminiscent of the death-drive, indicating the narrative's function as a journey through death, ending at the beginning.[78] Writing a narrative of the past has become a means of working through death and emerging at the end ready, to begin again. Beginning her novel with death and ending with Veronica's re-engagement with life, Enright is disrupting the boundaries that hold narrative in place and destabilizing narrative authority. *The Gathering* provides no easy answers or simple truths but it does attempt to address the problems of contemporary Ireland, suggesting that the traumas of the past must be dealt with before the future can be realized.

The Irish wake is portrayed in the novel as an outdated tradition but one that is, nonetheless, useful in exhuming the past and forcing the living to confront painful or traumatic memories. Yet this process is stalled by the fact that Liam died in England and his body must be brought back to Ireland. As she awaits the arrival of Liam's body Veronica comments: "The British, I decide, only bury people when they are so dead, you need another word for it. The British wait so long for a funeral that people gather not so much to mourn, as to complain that the corpse is still hanging around."[79] The fact that the whole Hegarty family has to wait for Liam's body disrupts the traditional Irish practice of waking the dead in the home soon after death. A different word for death is needed for how the

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[77] Ibid., 221-222

[78] Enright seems to be taking a distinctly Lacanian view of the death-drive not as a biological drive to a pre-birth but as a pre-linguistic and therefore pre-symbolic state experienced in infancy. See Jaques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection,* trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 102.

[79] Enright, 182.

British handle it, implying that the British and Irish do not share the same vocabulary in regard to death and that, by implication, there is a distinctly Irish way of handling death and dying. As she welcomes Liam's ex-girlfriend to his funeral Veronica comments: "And I suddenly feel very Irish as I reach out to take her hand in both my hands, to thank her for making the journey, to welcome her in and allow her to grieve."[80] What makes Veronica feel "Irish" is not any particular ritual pertaining to the burial of the dead but rather the simple act of allowing another to grieve. The idea of welcoming grief rather than denying it seems here to be a characteristic that marks Veronica as distinctly Irish, while the denial of death seems to be a symptom of British society. Despite her own ability to allow others to grieve, however, Veronica herself is incapable of properly mourning the loss of her favorite brother. Describing her own behavior Veronica observes: "My face sets into the mask of a woman weeping, one half pulled into a wail that the other half will not allow. There are no tears."[81] It is implied by this passage that the funeral does not allow for the release of emotion, that Veronica cannot genuinely grieve for her brother, instead putting on a mask that makes her look as if she were crying. Her grief cannot find outlet at the church funeral ceremony but does arrive later, at the funeral dinner at a hotel when her sister, Kitty sings Liam's favorite song and Liam's three- year- old son tells everyone to shut up. At this moment Veronica thinks: "I have never been to a happier funeral."[82] This last sentiment captures the very essence and paradox of the Irish

[80] Ibid., 241.
[81] Ibid., 243.
[82] Ibid., 248.

wake that laments death while also celebrating life. This experience allows Veronica to return to her memories and to experience the past in the present moment. However, it also works to defer the larger questions about death and the afterlife that surround the wake. At this point Liam's corpse disappears from the narrative and readers are left with the image of his young son, symbolizing the hope and promise of the future.

Beginning the narrative with Veronica laying out the bones of the past, *The Gathering* works in reverse order as a process of reanimation and coming to life rather than of dying. From bones, the ghosts of the past are brought back and at Liam's funeral become flesh and blood again, not in a literal way but figuratively, through Veronica and her family. In the absence of religious faith through which to express her grief or relieve her suffering, Veronica turns to narrative to make sense of Liam's death. The act of confessional narration works to purge Veronica's consciousness, allowing her to separate her thoughts from her actions in order to observe her own life. In this sense the act of narrative allows Veronica a kind of fictional death from which she can emerge at the end ready to begin again. Enright's interest in narrative then does not simply lie in understanding the past or unearthing some ultimate truth but rather in the present and in understanding Ireland's position in a global world by exposing its dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity, the religious and the secular. What is striking about *The Gathering*'s fictional depiction of the Irish wake is that the old rituals are abstracted and unfamiliar, seeming out of date. Despite Veronica's resistance to the traditional rituals attending the dead, her

adherence to these rituals serves to reaffirm the wake's folkloric connotations of rebirth and affirmation of life. In *The Gathering*, death is positioned at the beginning so that the backwards look it instigates becomes associated with the process of moving forward, with memory and imagination functioning as implements that propel Ireland to the future rather than dragging it back to the past.

VI.

The Gathering depicts an Ireland that is at odds with itself, a country that seeks to move rapidly into the future without consideration of the past. There is no place for death and grief in this modern life with its sleek surfaces, advanced technologies and virtual communities. In the novel, Liam's death serves to expose the virtual and unreal nature of this world, revealing the gap between the present and the past, and between the individual and the communal. For Veronica, Liam's death functions as a point of rupture, pausing her life and plunging her into a liminal state between past and present where she must interrogate her family history in order re-engage with life. Throughout the novel, Irish funeral practices are contrasted with those of the British, emphasizing the Irish wake as a place where these conflicts between traditional and modern are acted out. While Veronica sees the task of collecting Liam's body, returning it to Ireland to be buried, and the rituals surrounding the wake itself as impulses that are old fashioned and out of date, the very act of dealing with the body of the dead

ultimately proves cathartic, aiding her in working through her memories and overcoming her traumatic past.

In Enright's view, what distinguishes Irish death practices from British ones are their demand for the body of the dead to be present at the funeral, their preference that the wake occur as close as possible to the time of death, and their insistence that traditional rituals attend the corpse's disposal. In the novel, the process of retrieving Liam's corpse serves as a way of reviving the past, bringing the dead and the living together, and working through grief. The written narrative that accompanies this process reads like a psychiatric session, a working through of Freud's death-drive, which functions as a kind of "talking cure" by which trauma is overcome by repetition and telling.[83] Veronica's past memories and her narrative of the present are joined by the bodies of the dead and the truth that lingers in their bones.

The ending of Enright's novel, like the other novels in this study, leaves its readers with little closure or consolation, poised on the edge of an unknown future. Now that the demons of the past have been excavated and laid to rest, Enright seems to suggest, the characters can begin to live their lives authentically. Enright's depiction of death does not serve to expose a gap between Catholic conceptions of the afterlife and existentialist ideas of void and nothingness or the incompatibility of these notions, as in O'Brien or McGahern, but rather serves as a tool for excavating the past. In many ways Enright's depictions of death are

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[83] Mills-Harper, 79. Discussing the process of reading *The Gathering* she notes: "The reader of the novel is placed in the position of the analyst in a psychoanalytic setting, the book itself to be read as the couch, the scene of a 'talking cure.'"

similar to Joyce's in that both seek to insert death into life, blurring the lines between past and present and creating a narrative that feeds off the past. However, Enright ultimately fails to secure death's position in life, in the end returning the dead to their graves, relegating them to the past that, once acknowledged, can open the future. Veronica's role as narrator allows her a retrospective view of her life and her family history. In her liminal state Veronica can order and make sense of her life and Liam's. In this way, her memories take on a fictional quality through their narrative ordering and re-ordering which resembles the process of novelistic composition. The suggestion at the end of the novel is that Veronica's act of narrative has allowed her to imaginatively work through death, giving her a deeper understanding of her past and allowing her to return to life.

What is ultimately unclear from the ending of Enright's novel is how this individual purging of sins and excavation of the past can serve to reconcile the individual with the community or to address the larger questions surrounding death and dying. Enright's novelistic depiction of the Irish wake may serve to remind readers of the importance of ritual in dealing with death, but it does not fully address the question of how religious narratives fit together with the liberal humanist focus on life and the fulfillment of human desires. For all its focus on the body and the bones of the past that can be recovered through memory, *The Gathering* fails to deal with death's reality. Instead, Veronica's account serves to make death abstract and intangible, offering consolation to the dead rather than to the living.

Novelistic narrative may indeed provide a way of working through traumatic memories, but if it is to offer any understanding of death, it must also serve as a place where religious and secular conceptions of death come into conflict or are allowed to co-exist in interesting and complex ways. Enright's novel suggests that traditional rituals surrounding death are necessary to cope with grief and to deal with the past, and Catholic imagery features in the novel as a reminder of mortal suffering and redemption. While the religious is allowed to co-exist with the secular, there is little sense that these two things are working together to provide consolation for death or to make sense of the world. In the end, the ways that the Catholic focus on bodily suffering and privileging of the afterlife over earthly existence overlaps with the liberal humanist focus on self-fulfillment and the realization of human desires within mortal time needs further interrogation. The dead do not merely function as reminders of past traumas but also as reminders of human mortality. Novels are a place where these worldviews clash, blend and merge. Novelistic narrative then holds the possibility not only of working through the past and exposing its lost or marginalized histories, but also of bringing together living and dead, providing a way of interrogating death's function in society and forcing the individual to confront his or her mortality.

The Gathering explores the state of contemporary Ireland in new and complex ways, depicting Irish society as neither entirely secular nor entirely religious. Enright's experimental use of style and structure to express the ruptures in memory created by trauma is an intriguing break with the realist or naturalist style in which many other Irish novels are written. Yet, Enright's use of the

confessional form, her portrayal of Veronica's liminal state, her use of death as an impetus for narrative, and particularly, her depictions of the rituals attending the wake, all situate *The Gathering* in a distinctly Irish novelistic tradition of portraying death and dying. Death in novelistic narrative serves to reveal the novel's underlying tensions and provides a way of working through human anxieties concerning mortality. While the novel form cannot offer any concrete answers for the modern individual struggling to make sense of death and the afterlife, it can integrate his or her concerns into a larger communal narrative where conflicting worldviews can coexist. Enright's novel seems to have finally reached a kind of balance between Catholic and liberal humanist conceptions of death and, though it does not offer much insight into how these worldviews might work together to make sense of death or offer consolation for its losses, the possibility of reconciliation offers hope for the future.

Conclusion

As has become evident from my readings of these five novels, novelistic narrative cannot provide answers to questions of life or death or how to die properly, nor can it solve the problem of grief or make sense of human suffering. However, novels can provide a structure and a form for interrogating the fragmenting and often frightening experience of death. In the modern Irish novel, the prevalence of wakes, funerals and rituals attending the dead are indicative of an abiding cultural interest in death. These fictional depictions of the end of life reveal the uneasy co-existence of religious and secular conceptions of human existence and the afterlife. Read together, these novels do not simply trace a shift from Catholic to secular conceptions of death but, rather, illustrate the ways in which ideas about death and dying are altered and shaped by the interactions between these two worldviews. Even as secular conceptions gain ground, these novels remain resistant to the idea of death as a final and absolute ending, suggesting a need for some sort of consolation in the face of death, whether religious or otherwise.

Death is undoubtedly a grim topic, but in the Irish context, representations of the Irish wake and novelistic treatments of the dead, often feature humorous elements as well. The anxious laughter provoked by Bloom's comic vision in *Ulysses* of Paddy Dignam's corpse falling from the funeral carriage to the road or by Malone's futile efforts to end his life by narrating his own death in *Malone Dies*, serves to remind us that reading about death need not be an entirely

depressing encounter. In the Irish novel, the nearness of death triggers images of beauty and macabre humor, suggesting that death is not simply a destructive force that ends life, but that it is also a creative force which generates new life and impels the formation of narrative.

This study ends with Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, in which the reader is presented with a version of a modern Irish wake that features many of the old customs and superstitions. The characters in *The Gathering* adhere to traditions such as waking the dead at home, staying up all night with the corpse and drinking. However, in the urban secular context in which these characters live, many of these rituals have lost their meaning. Enright's novel leaves the reader with a sense that, while these rituals may seem out of date, they still hold some power to relieve the pain of grief in a secular world that offers few alternatives. While funeral rituals in Ireland now feature a blend of Catholic and secular elements, the struggle between these two worldviews and their conceptions of death has not been entirely resolved. As recent debates around assisted death and euthanasia suggest, the conflicts between religious and secular humanist worldviews continue to pose new moral conundrums in the twenty-first century.

Medical advancements and technologies have now made it possible to extend life and to grant even terminal patients a few extra days or even months of life. Questions continue to be raised about the cost of these advancements and the ethical issues surrounding the end of life. What constitutes a "good death" and how that kind of death is achieved continues to be a much-discussed topic. The notion of an ideal has shifted from the religious *ars moriendi,* which instructed the

dying how to die a "good death" by atoning for their sins, mending personal relationships and ordering worldly affairs, to a more secular ideal death in which the dying person experiences little to no pain and dies comfortably, surrounded by friends and family. What is particularly interesting about this shift is that a "good death" in the secular sense described above is not seen as an ideal or something that is difficult to achieve but is, rather, viewed as a basic human right. The fact that medical professionals now view death as a "failure" and people debate about the right to die, seems to suggest that death is within the grasp of human control. Yet, in spite of this illusion of control that modern medicine provides, death still happens at the most unexpected and inconvenient of times and without consideration of the wishes or rights of the people involved.

These technological advancements and conflicts surrounding death raise new moral concerns, bringing religious and secular worldviews into contact in fascinating ways. Recent memoirs and novels exploring these questions suggest that literary narrative continues to provide a form where these questions can be addressed and worked through. In her memoir, *An Act of Love: One Woman's Remarkable Life Story and Her Fight for the Right to Die with Dignity*, Marie Fleming details her battle with Multiple Sclerosis and the legal battles she undertook in order to fulfill her wish to die with dignity, at home with her family rather than in pain and suffering.[1] Fleming lost the case in the Supreme Court of Ireland, where she argued that the ban on assisted suicide violated her constitutional rights. Her case succeeded in bringing attention to end of life care

[1] Marie Fleming, *An Act of Love: One Woman's Remarkable Life Story and Her Fight for the Right to Die with Dignity* (Dublin: Hachette Books Ireland, 2014).

and the rights of the dying and disabled. Her memoir was published after her death on the 20th of December 2013. Denied the right to take her own life, Fleming succumbed to her disease in the end, but nevertheless died peacefully in her home, surrounded by her partner and children. Fleming's landmark right to die case and the memoir that followed it opened a new public forum for the discussion of the moral issues surrounding death and dying and raised questions about what constitutes a "good death" and how this kind of death is to be achieved or even if it is always attainable.

In his recent novel, *Every Single Minute*, Hugo Hamilton offers a fictionalized account of the time he spent with Nuala O'Faolain and a group of other writers in Berlin, in the final weeks of O'Faolain's life.[2] The trip to Berlin fulfilled O'Faolain's dying wish and Hamilton describes how she seemed to revise the view she so poignantly described in her interview with Marian Finucane, that the world "went black" as soon as she found out she was dying. According to Hamilton, on the Berlin trip, O'Faolain "wanted to see everything and she spoke with extraordinary optimism."[3] Indeed, this portrait of the end of O'Faolain's life offers a much more hopeful view of things than her final interview with Finucane suggested. Hamilton further comments on O'Faolain's time in Berlin and notes: "It was a strange contradiction, that the closeness to

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[2] Hugo Hamilton, *Every Single Minute* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014).
[3] John Spain, "How Nuala's last trip restored her enthusiasm for life, " review of *Every Single Minute* by Hugo Hamilton, *The Irish Independent*, February 22, 2014. http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/how-nualas-last-trip-restored-her-enthusiasm-for-life-30031750.html.

death gave great urgency to living."[4] It seems odd that Hamilton should describe this contradiction as "strange" because this is a fairly standard and almost banal view of the end of life. While O'Faolain's interview laid bare the anxieties and fears surrounding secular death and refused any kind of consolation to ease the pain of dying, Hamilton's novel offers a much more conventional and optimistic view of the end of life as sad but meaningful. Though these two portraits of O'Faolain might seem to contradict one another, causing one to wonder if Hamilton did not simply invent a fictional character loosely based on the writer in order to offer a more hopeful view of her death, it is entirely possible that these two accounts are both accurate and reveal the complicated and conflicting emotions that surround the end of life. Hamilton's novel, as a work of fiction, does not promise truth or accuracy, but rather, blurs the lines between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, calling into question fixed notions of life and death, beginning and ending. However, rather than using the form to his advantage in exploring some of the difficult questions raised by O'Faolain's interview, Hamilton seems here to be stressing the fictional quality of the novel and using it to defer these questions. Instead the novel offers a beautiful memory of O'Faolain's last days and therefore provides a more comforting or consoling view of her death.

Despite human attempts to tame or control death, it remains something that can never be fully known or understood. The novel is the ideal form for interrogating death and the religious and moral questions it raises not only

[4] Ibid.

because of its dialogic nature but also because it deals with emotions and imagination rather than solid facts, allowing for a greater elasticity in thinking about these matters. While *Every Single Minute* seems in many ways to soften the bleak view of death that O'Faolain herself described, it does not dissolve or diminish that view. It is very possible that O'Faolain's last days were characterized not simply by unmitigated despair but that they featured a series of contradictory feelings that vacillated between optimism and depression, between fear and tranquility. It is also conceivable that O'Faolain accepted death in the end and that this eased her anxieties and gave her a sense of hope. Novelistic portrayals of death and dying allow these conflicting and contradictory emotions to exist side-by-side, allowing for a realistic and multi-layered view of the experience of dying.

While the novel provides no answers to the questions surrounding human existence and does not offer instructions on how to die properly, it can shape and interrogate the way we conceive of death and the ways that we deal with the loss, suffering and grief that accompanies the process of dying. In a modern world dominated by medical and technological advancements that are focused on life and how to live longer, death is often denied and viewed as failure. However, there is also an increasing tendency for those who suffer extreme physical pain to view death as a desired end, one that promises relief from their anguish. This tension between the dread of death, its association with failure, and death as a final choice that one has a right to make, will undoubtedly continue to provoke much debate and even to inspire many interesting new novels.

This thesis began with a desire to understand the ways that death and dying structure and shape the form of the Irish novel and what that might reveal about larger conceptions of death and the afterlife. In the end, perhaps, these novels cannot provide us with the answers we seek, but in their portrayals of death and dying they force us to face that which we dread most. By requiring us to confront our own mortality, these novels work to make us less afraid of our final end and give these fears and anxieties a form and structure. In this way, the Irish novel continues to offer valuable material for future interrogations of death and dying.

The focus of this thesis was largely on religious and secular conceptions of death, but there remain many different ways of approaching the topic and much work to be done. Recent initiatives such as the "Forum on End of Life in Ireland," established by the Irish Hospice Foundation, promote public debate on issues relating to death, dying and bereavement.[5] Initiatives like this suggest that there is a wider cultural interest in these issues and also indicate a shift in the way that death is discussed and dealt with. These debates on death and the way that it is being discussed in terms of individual rights will undoubtedly shape the way that writers, artists and filmmakers approach the topic. It is evident from Irish films, such as *Waking Ned Devine* (1998), *Kings* (2007) and, more recently, Bernadette Manton's short film, *The Wake* (2014), that the topic of death, funerals and the wake continue to be of great interest in Irish popular culture. While the Irish wake

[5] For more information on the "Forum on End of Life in Ireland" see http://hospicefoundation.ie/what-we-do/forum-on-end-of-life/forum-on-end-of-life/.

remains a popular trope in Irish culture, it is perhaps, of even greater interest to foreign audiences. The way that the Irish-American wake is portrayed in novels like Alice McDermott's *At Weddings and Wakes* (1992), or in popular television shows like *The Wire* (2002), undoubtedly influence how Ireland is perceived abroad. The relationship between the nineteenth century notion of an "American Wake" — a party thrown for loved ones emigrating to America — and the Irish Wake itself and how this relationship contributes to our understanding of death, might be one way that this theme could be approached in future studies.

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