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Dana RADLER

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0059-0832>

University of Bucharest

‘Touched’ by Humour in Life: Characters in John McGahern’s Fiction

Abstract: In John McGahern’s works, characters emerge in both comic and tragic instances, and their whole existence comes under the spotlight, as the writer uses mild, ironic or sarcastic touches, which have not been examined so far. In between automatisms and mobility often directed at dogmatism or mental stereotypes displayed by characters, clergymen, workers, teachers, writers or family members display their ignorance, occasional (lack of) manners, boredom or elevation, often imitating what seems to be ‘decent’ in terms of taste. Building on the three main approaches to humour (superiority, incongruity and relief according to John Morreall) yet refuting a monolithic interpretation.

This paper explores how class, gender and false pretences are ridiculed and exposed in both novels and short stories. Laughter moves from a classical Kantian *play* instance to a Freudian-supported analysis of condensation and ambiguity as vehicles employed by a realist creator. The narrative often alternates between family roles and poles of power, visible and invisible laughter, as natural and changing (or hybrid) as human nature. Examples extracted from McGahern’s novels, short stories, memoir and essays present differentiations in the actions of protagonists such as imitation or repetition as attributes of routine and failure, while fear and violence stem from a reactive, insensitive behaviour which the narrative exposes succinctly or at length. Shared by others, or not, such experiences nuance Irish identity, the mix of humour and realism opening itself to further reading, connecting, for instance, McGahern’s works to psychoanalysis, angelic versus demonic laughter or carnival laughter (Alfie Bown).

Keywords: John McGahern, narrative, humour, laughter.

1. Introduction

In his study dedicated to laughter and humour, Wallace Chafe defines laughter as “a way of intentionally eliciting the feeling of nonseriousness.”¹ His insight echoes a necessary detachment and a change of perspective revealed by John McGahern in an interview conducted by Rosa Gonzales in which the novelist talks about his return home, after several years spent abroad following the banning of his second novel, *The Dark* in 1965: “But I think it was probably good for me to go away, because it’s almost like a person, one has to lose them to see them in perspective.”² The distance which made him value his homeland is, several decades later, perspective looked upon with indulgence and almost warm acceptance.

This paper examines particular elements in McGahern’s narrative in terms of humour, wit, conflictual circumstances, routine or rejection. Various types of characters display their ignorance, boredom or higher standards, often imitating what seems to be ‘decent’ in terms of taste, conforming to local standards.

In general, three theoretical perspectives have shaped laughter: the Superiority Theory, the Incongruity Theory and the Theory of Relief. John Morreall lists Plato, Hobbes and Roger Scruton as key contributors adhering to Superiority: though far from purposefully adopting this name, the theory emerged under this name because as these thinkers observed that laughter expresses feelings of superiority, a lesson to be learnt out of it, either coming out of self-evaluation or exterior assessment.³

While Superiority followers claim the merits of a higher human stand triggering laughter, those in favour of Incongruity scrutinize a certain clash or violation of expectations as prompting a comic result, and this happens outside ordinary structures or patterns. Main theorists include Aristotle, Cicero, Immanuel Kant, James Beattie, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Soren Kierkegaard, to name a few.

The Relief Theory, based on the writing of Lord Shaftesbury,⁴ sees laughter as a physiological release of the energy that has been accumulated by the

¹ Wallace Chafe, *The Importance of Not Being Earnest: The Feeling Behind Laughter and Humor* (Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 1.

² Jaqueline Hurtley and Rosa Gonzales and Inés Praga and Esther Aliaga, *Ireland in Writing: Interviews with Writers and Academics* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), 41.

³ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 5–13.

⁴ Anthony Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom and Wit of Humour,” in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinion, Times*, vo. I, ed. Lawrence Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, reprint: London 1709), 29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803284.008>.

recipient, based on an instantaneous and rather unavoidable reaction; Shaftesbury was closely followed by Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud.

Despite such distinctions, one theory may actually complement another, since Superiority does not completely exclude the release effect, or Relief may successfully operate in combination with Incongruity aspects, following a vision focused on humour ingrained in suspense.⁵

From the philosophical realm, humour and comedy have benefited from the support of new cultural theories, including psychoanalytical criticism. In his effort to analyse the mechanism of composing jokes, Freud notes familiarity as being common to numerous cultural expressions, and sees it as being based on using typical sounds, phrases and allusions to both the creator and the recipient. He therefore sees the source of enjoying comic effects as relying on "the rediscovery of something familiar."⁶ Yet this element does not operate alone, he sees it as being closely linked to what is named 'topicality,' or cultural connections which provide maximum potency to a certain joke or comic effect. This also brings forward the idea of its duration with thriving being followed by decline and death.

While examining the conceptual background, Morreall highlights the limits of the three theories, suggesting that the analysis of psychic expenditure, applicable to Freud's vision, emerges from laughter, comic and humour not as directly-designed as presented by the founder of psychoanalysis but rather within a broader and more suggestive type of expression.

The son of Susan McGahern, a National Teacher, and Frank McGahern, an officer in the Gardai, the Irish police force, John McGahern (1934–2006) spent his childhood in typical Irish settings. He felt that writing was a compelling choice and abandoned his early career as a teacher. Author of several novels, and collections of short stories, he received many distinctions and literary awards. Acclaimed for his distinctive amalgamation of memories with the imaginary, McGahern reveals a detached, but not fully neutral point of view, except in *Memoir*. His novels and short stories present both male and female roles, often in restrictive Irish communities where difficult social relationships shape one's identity. Young or aged, his protagonists are engaged in conflictual or routine activities, and display or lack a broad understanding of their own existence. Often a minor reference may promptly illuminate the whole story and instil a new reading. Critical studies to this date have mainly covered aspects of his biography versus his writing,⁷ perspec-

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Cosimo, 2007).

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin, 1974 [1905]), 149.

⁷ Denis Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

tives of his novels looked at against his short stories,⁸ and complex relationships with classical authors.⁹ Recent contributions have also inspected modernist touches in his works,¹⁰ an understanding of his early and later works¹¹ while detecting irony or detached humour¹².

2. Boredom, routine and potential clashes

McGahern's protagonists get often engaged in complex, potentially or openly conflictual rapport. While numerous characters appear as empathetic towards the members of their family or community, some prefer to stay reserved and at a certain distance from *the other*. In "Why We're Here", McGahern's humour targets the English-assumed superiority, as expressed by two ordinary locals engaged in conversation. Boles, a local, imitates the patronizing tone of his English neighbour, Sinclair: "«Touched, that's all»"¹³ he concludes. He then imitates Sinclair's own criticism of the Irish: "«The ignorance and the boredom of the people of this part of the country is appalling, simply appalling.»"¹⁴ By using the term "touched" the voice of the narrator echoes a critical vision partially opposing long-acclaimed predecessors, such authors of the Irish Literary Revival/Renaissance. McGahern's characters may be touched, but not by ignorance and boredom, although these seem to impact the Irish in the early and mid-twentieth century. They are "touched" by a different mind-set, they live in a space infused by ancient traditions, filled with harsh or soft humour. Looked at from McGahern's point of view, the fragment but apparently hints at superiority theory: in fact,

⁸ Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Leffey Press, 2003).

⁹ See Stanley van der Zeel, *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* (Cork: University Press, 2015); Frank Shovlin, *Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Richard Robinson, *John McGahern and Modernism* (London/New York/Oxford/New Delhi/Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Željka Doljanin and Maire Doyle, ed., *John McGahern: Authority and Vision* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Anita Morgan, "Understanding the Imperfect in John McGahern's First and Last Novels," in González-Arias, Mar Luz, *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹² Dermot McCarthy, *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (Oxford / Bern: Peter Lang, 2010); Doljanin and Doyle, eds., *John McGahern: Authority and Vision*; Richard Robinson, *John McGahern and Modernism* (London/New York/Oxford/New Delhi/Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

¹³ John McGahern, *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 13.

¹⁴ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 13.

McGahern exposes what the reader learns to be the reality of his formative years in Ireland; at the end of the story, most often than not, the writer accepts his protagonists. As a result, he does not share Boles' own satire; instead, he adopts places and characters taken from his past and reconfigures them in a widely comprehensive, humanistic vision.

In his collection of essays, *Love of the World* (2009), McGahern, with a calm yet highly ironic vision, describes a trick used to attract young women in the Dublin of his days:

One day I saw two of them [barmen] sporting Trinity scarves. I was surprised to learn that they bought the scarves, supposing that they had been left behind in one of the bars by roistering students. They told me that because of the irregular hours they worked they had had difficulty picking up girls until they discovered that if they hung about the front gate of Trinity on their day off wearing the scarves they could pick up working-class Dublin girls more easily than hunting through the city as plain barmen.¹⁵

This fragment connects to Jonathan Taylor's view upon laughter and literature. In the third chapter of his study devoted to laughter and literature, Taylor refers to "generic and emotional hybridity," which reflects the very nature of memoirs, often mixing humour and drama¹⁶. In "Wheels" (first published in *Nightlines* in 1971), an Irish emigrant comes back home, and the story opens with the image of rattling wheels on the railway platform: "three porters pushing an empty trolley up the platform to a stack of grey mail-bags, the loose wheels rattling, and nothing but wait and watch and listen."¹⁷ Based on Freud's vision on humour as part of a broader mental picture, this episode builds on the idea of "play" based on "a repetition of what is familiar,"¹⁸ making the protagonist enjoy, through the voice of the writer, life far away from routine rules and rigid standards, "in order to derive pleasure from the free use of words and thoughts."¹⁹ In addition, a good joke needs to contain an element of "surprise" and this implies that the hearer assimilates it instantly. This also explains why, in his vision, masters of laughter need an audience to deliver their products: it is impossible to fulfil the conditions of *creating* and *delivering* laughter at the same time.

Wheels turn in this short story as a metaphor of monotony and implacably ordered life. The protagonist himself feels annoyed: "the story too close to the likeness of my own life for comfort though it'd do to please Lightfoot

¹⁵ John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 36.

¹⁶ Jonathan Taylor, *Laughter, Literature, Violence, 1840–1930* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 91.

¹⁷ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 3.

¹⁸ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 157.

¹⁹ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 168.

in the pub when I got back”²⁰ he declares after an overheard conversation about a man who had drowned himself. Shortly after, one companion resorts to common sense: “«no use drowning naturally if you’d meant to hang yourself in the first place.»”²¹ This scene parallels *Waiting for Godot* according to Stanley van der Zeel, which ends, in McGahern’s case, with “a similar cheap laugh.”²² Van der Zeel thus points to the relief function of laughter in the story by the Irish writer.

The uneasiness of the main protagonist is in sharp contrast to his own jest, mirroring a deeper discomfort. The character, whose name is purposely left unknown to the end, as often the case in McGahern’s stories, reflects on his temporary lustful impulse: “the dull search about the platform for vacancy between well-fleshed thighs: may I in my relax-slacks (Hackney, London), plunge into your roomy ripeness and forget present difficulties?”²³ This line indirectly casts a light onto the character’s social status, age and failed ambitions, yet the tone is soft, almost amiable. This mild *touche* reflects the Relief approach, the character attempting to surpass current existential concerns.

At times, humour is mixed with resignation. In *Memoir*, while describing recent events, the novelist’s mother, Susan McGahern, attempts to cope with the attention of locals when she returns home after being hospitalized. As her health deteriorates, her husband arranges a visit to their neighbours, the Walshes, but the host “went to a great deal of trouble to entertain her without having either the money or the social skills, when it would have been a far happier evening, my mother said, if they could have sat in some corner and talked over a cup of tea or a glass of water.”²⁴ Susan McGahern then wittily comments on the arrival of Guard Walsh, the son of the family, at the end of her visit there: “He was starving and gobbled up all that was left of the meal.”²⁵

Individual frustration makes the son in “Wheels” condemn Rose, the stepmother. She had replaced the pictures of the protagonist’s deceased mother “with the confetti-strewn black and white of her own, the sensible blue costume in place of the long white dress to the silver shoes. She’d been too old for white.”²⁶ The final sentence ridicules her own plain looks when

²⁰ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 3.

²¹ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 3.

²² Stanley van der Zeel, *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2015), 490.

²³ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 3.

²⁴ John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 89.

²⁵ McGahern, *Memoir*, 89.

²⁶ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 7.

compared to the first wife of the local sergeant. The vulnerable protagonist later targets this childless woman: "too old for children too, the small first communion and the confirmation photos stayed on the sideboard, replaced by no other, only disappearing when the youngest left and they were alone."²⁷ He is actually backed in harshness by his father's criticism of a female neighbour, recently deceased, and manifested via common language. The father uses manly conventional discourse to describe physical characteristics, in this instance Mrs McGreevy's rounded pelvis: "They were sure they'd never hear the edge of her tongue again either in hell or heaven or the duck-arsed in between."²⁸

3. 'Touched' protagonists: bonds, hiatuses and (absent) choices

The narrative often alternates between family roles and poles of power, as well as plain or rather subtle laughter, as natural and deep as human nature. The frailness and austerity of such characters is partially justifiable by the nature of the Irish who knew, in McGahern's vision, no easy way to openly express rejection:

Round where...the people that I grew up with, they were marvellous people and they came out of a long tradition of inter-dependence and they were very gentle but they were people who would never give you a direct answer. [Laughter and applause] I describe it... "It was a language that had no easy way of saying no." And of course it can be very frustrating for outsiders. And of course the Gaelic speech comes into it as well. Nobody in Ireland will ask you, Are you going to town? They'll say, You wouldn't by any chance be going to town now, would you?²⁹

The inability to reject someone, despite most difficult relationships, and lasting conflicts infuses a mild irony in the text. The protagonist is not isolated in his anger, he understands others and is able to see their reasons, and actions, but he does make his own choices, and may leave space for others to step in, or the contrary. In "The Stoat" the young male protagonist sees a rabbit being killed by a stoat, and the narrative acquires a cinematic effect: "I saw the wet slick of blood behind its ear, the blood pumping out on the sand"³⁰. The reference to "plumper rabbits" becomes brief yet sarcastic, tar-

²⁷ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 7.

²⁸ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 7.

²⁹ Hermione Lee, *Readings and Conversations: John McGahern*, April 4 2004, <https://lan-nan.org/images/lit/john-mcgahern-040407-trans-read.pdf>, 5.

³⁰ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 152.

getting a potential fiancée pursued by the father in the story. "The Stoat" is actually about McGahern's own father trying to get married for a second time. The episode re-emerges in *Memoir*, referring to the school principal, Miss McCabe, who was briefly considered a candidate for Sergeant McGahern's second marriage. In this narrative, the writer employs a rather neutral tone, and the story steadily and ironically builds on his father's fear when he learns that the woman had had a heart attack: "The effect was startling. Within an hour he had gathered up the pots and pans we'd brought, written a letter to the teacher, and packed the whole family except myself into the small blue Ford."³¹ Her potentially serious condition makes the sergeant forget the amiable gentleman's stance, turn cowardly and beat a hurried retreat to safety, leaving the teenager to deal with dispatching the news to the unfortunate woman. The episode about miss McCabe validates Taylor's vision upon humour as being occasionally combined with a particular type of realism, the result being "a mixture of *aesthetic* truthfulness which applies not only to memoir but to fiction."³²

In *The Collected Stories*, the teenager's criticism doubles with the vision of a mature narrator, the scene being looked at with both the eyes of a son, and those of a grown-up: "I thought their formality strange, and I even stranger chaperon."³³ This follows an earlier episode when the cautious widower tries to get his son's agreement upon his choices of a second wife after poring over marriage replies to his own adv. The son's reaction is instantly dissimulated, but the narrator casts an indirect light upon his real feelings: "Teacher, fifty-two. Seeks companionship. View marriage. «What do you think of it?» he asked. «I think it's fine.»" Dismay cancelled a sudden wild impulse to roar with laughter."³⁴ The son's reaction places his actions on the border of incongruity and relief, and his subsequent comments display a cold, reserved and calculated humour: "A huge pile of envelopes lay on his desk. I was amazed. I had no idea that so much unfulfilled longing wandered around in the world."³⁵ His response is reflected by that of the postman who "inquired slyly if the school was seeking a new assistant" or of the post office assistant who "said in a faraway voice that if we were looking for a housekeeper she had a relative who might be interested."³⁶ Either because of fear or perhaps willing to find a potential ally and discourage that quest which unnerves him, the boy confesses disclosing his father's plan to his uncle,

³¹ McGahern, *Memoir*, 181.

³² Taylor, *Laughter, Literature, Violence*, 91.

³³ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 153.

³⁴ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 154.

³⁵ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 154.

³⁶ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 154.

whose reply is instant yet alarmed: “«You must be joking. You’d think boring one poor woman in a lifetime would be enough.»”³⁷ Learning that his brother-in-law had placed an advertisement into in the papers to find a suitable candidate makes the uncle become “convulsed with laughter” and “hardly able to get words out,”³⁸ his physiological reactions corresponding to the Relief theory.

The meeting with the female candidate transforms the son into a critic of their ‘decently’-placed romantic poses, as both father and teacher sat “very stiffly and properly, like two well-dressed, well-behaved children seeking adult approval.”³⁹ Her appearance generates in the boy’s mind an immediate antipathy, despite her equally ‘decent’ looks: “Though old, she was like a girl, in love with being in love a whole life long without ever settling on any single demanding presence until this late backward glance fell on my bereft but seeking father.”⁴⁰ Despite her pleasant looks, the father is still hesitant and uncertain about their expected engagement: “The way he looked at me told me he was far from convinced that he had been lucky.”⁴¹ The irony shifts to absurdity in the finale, with hundreds of golf clubs hitting the green surface of the grass, the image covering endless “plumper rabbits” crossing the stoat’s path, with one being marked and killed by the determined stoat, a predictable end in the love-and-chase *play*. The predator-prey connection transferred from the animal kingdom to the human world suggests that late marriages develop into an erratic pursuit. It connects to Freud’s vision about psychic expenditure and the mental reward and pleasure derived out of such an intense effort. The inability of the older male to grasp the meaning of such an event places the whole episode under the umbrella of a high emotional investment followed by catastrophic loss.

Stefan Horlacher suggests that fictional pieces consequently turn into “rewarding objects of analysis since they have the ability to articulate impressions, intuitions, mentalities and pre-scientific forms of knowledge long before – if ever – they reach the status of the collective consciousness.”⁴² Horlacher examines the inter-connections between earlier-quoted concepts, such as subversion or mimesis, since laughter “is evanescent, negates differences, and harbours paradoxical traits.”⁴³ In his novel, *The Pornographer*,

³⁷ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 154.

³⁸ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 154–5.

³⁹ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 155.

⁴⁰ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 155.

⁴¹ McGahern, *The Collected Stories*, 156.

⁴² Gaby Pailer and Andreas Böhn and Stefan Horlacher and Ulrich Scheck, *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009), 19.

⁴³ Pailer and Böhn and Horlacher and Scheck, *Gender and Laughter*, 19.

McGahern articulately explores the simultaneous play and contrast resulting from plain and hidden realities in the account of a nephew visiting his hospitalized aunt. Aware that his aunt's days may end soon, the young man brings in and helps her sip brandy. The aged woman appears as concealing a precious item: "she covered over the glass, covering the dark little act with a small bird's wing,"⁴⁴ while the young male is highly anxious, monitoring the reactions of the nuns. The aunt's remark: "In this place, they have noses like whippets,"⁴⁵ suggests that nurses may occasionally become quite harsh on a patient, silently watched by the nuns assimilated to tenacious greyhounds. The aunt's sense of humour extends in comments over other patients' reactions: when the nephew unexpectedly brings in a bunch of chrysanthemums, she openly voices her preference for familiar vegetables: "A good head of lettuce or a string of onions would give me more joy than all the flowers in the world."⁴⁶ To this end, the writer makes clear his point of view about repetition and difference: "Everything happens again but always slightly different."⁴⁷ In *Love of the World*, McGahern returns to that memorable example of ambivalence as voicing "[t]he Gaelic gift for invective,"⁴⁸ but the force of its expression is attributed to long decades of difficult learning under which, for instance, the "famine mentality" was often mentioned by historians as an explanation for "antisocial, even irrational acts of greed or miserliness" to be followed by an "increasingly diverse and fragmented Ireland."⁴⁹

Irony also reflects the experience of illiterate poor Irish asking for support in their family correspondence with those working across the Atlantic. In McGahern's novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, a particular episode indicates the comical shock inflicted on the local principal temporarily contracted as a letter-writer:

In those days if you couldn't write you went to the school-master who charged a fee like a lawyer. When he had it all down on paper, the master read the letter back to them. They seemed satisfied enough but didn't say much and he asked if they'd like to add a PS. They wanted to know at once if there'd be an extra charge to add a PS. When told there wasn't they said, "Go ahead. It'll look better. Write this PS: Please excuse bad writing and spelling. "You'd love to see the master's face – it could have been old Master Glynn – when that comeoutance was delivered. "Please excuse bad writing and spelling," he repeated. "Lord bless us but there were some awful poor people going about then."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 46.

⁴⁵ McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 46.

⁴⁶ McGahern, *The Pornographer*, 61.

⁴⁷ Lee, *Readings and Conversations*, 2

⁴⁸ John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber 2009), 125.

⁴⁹ McGahern, *Love of the World*, 126.

⁵⁰ John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 189.

Humour, conflicts and absurd work together as regards common literary taste in an episode involving young John and his father, the Sergeant. The Gardai officer thinks of himself as being able to provide literary counselling to his own offspring, telling his son to follow the footsteps of John D. Sheridan, a renowned Irish author. Young McGahern silently rejects such a suggestion. Even if John McGahern's works are later praised by the very critic referred to by his father, the lack of consideration for parental advice points to ongoing tension and failure of parental authority, asserted through a witty comment:

What he [McGahern's father] didn't know was that Sheridan was a serious man who had written textbooks on Shakespeare. And it must have been a disastrous day for my father when he opened his favourite newspaper. Across the top of the book page he saw «Classical tragedy comes to *The Barracks*»⁵¹. John D. Sheridan was the reviewer. John D. Sheridan was never referred to again in the house. I sent my father a copy of *The Barracks* (the character in *The Barracks* isn't my father at all, and in fact Elizabeth is completely imagined. The man in *The Barracks* is a nicer man than my father, but he was a police sergeant like my father) and I got this reply: 'An old police sergeant is sitting here in the dark and waiting until the lamp flickers or at least shows light. Love, Daddy.' That was the response. *The Barracks* was never mentioned again.⁵²

In his habitual anecdotal style, McGahern closes the story about the two young barmen using Trinity College scarves to attract young women, presented in *Love of the World* (2009). The ending of that episode, looked at considerable distance from the moment it had happened, stays open to the reader:

If someone had suggested then that thirty years later I would come to live for six months in Trinity as Writer Fellow, I would have laughed. At that time, thirty years ahead appeared so far away that it was as inconceivable as it was undesirable ever to reach, and coming to Trinity would have only compounded the disbelief; but since those years this country has changed more than during the entire previous century: the Reserved sin has gone, the two traditions now work and study in the college.⁵³

In this case, but also frequently in McGahern's writing, self-targeted humour elicits a moral, working as a leverage meant to stimulate experiential learning and ongoing reflection. At the same time, it eases tension between characters, frequently set for rather a longer than a shorter while, supporting thus the relief effect.

⁵¹ McGahern's first novel, published in 1963.

⁵² Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis, "John McGahern – b. 1934," *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 41 (Autumn 2003), <http://jsse.revues.org/314>.

⁵³ McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, 36.

4. Conclusion

McGahern, the adult and the narrator, makes his understanding clear as his voice often interferes with those of his characters, adding a new touch, of human sympathy, compassion or acceptance of the past. Occasionally, his views fail to be shared by other members of his family. In *Memoir*, the adult writer recounts the story of Sergeant McGahern's crossing the authority of Canon Reilly in Ballinamore, for whom catechism classes were compulsory on Sunday, though in other dioceses the priests were less strict about it. When the presbyter aggressively drives young McGahern by the ear to attend the class, the father vehemently opposes such an act. As the writer attempts later to get a clear image of the whole event, the rest of the family seems to have completely erased it from their minds: "I tried to bring up the incident a number of times, with my mother, with Pat, with Maggie, but every attempt was ignored. Nobody would talk". Although the writer outlines this particular memory with the intention to understand human actions and reactions, the silent response of his relatives shows an invisible but extraordinarily clear demarcation in issues possibly seen as directed against the Church: "they must have felt that some dangerous boundary had been crossed."⁵⁴ Therefore, any kind of further discussion would lead into an unsafe, and unbearable mental territory, crossing the earlier mentioned boundaries of a *play*. In between strong views or warm comments, McGahern's position shifts in his stories and novels between the three listed theories, being closer to incongruity or relief than to superiority nuances. His stories then stand as a symbolically-built realm, outside the restrictions of reality, in either a safe or, occasionally-challenged, playful state of mind. In McGahern's writing, both female and male protagonists employ humour upon themselves, their family or members of their community, expressing their views as a spontaneous act in one's life.

Such instances reveal the capacity of humour and play to work together (according to Kant), widening up to the vision of clash and relief (Freud), aligning such views to Aristotle's standpoint: humour as play has a therapeutic value if it is included in the *eutrapelia* concept of "turning well". Laughter thus becomes an intrinsic component of their lives especially when conditions are harsh or those around the protagonists are demanding or authoritative in their expectations, actions and reactions. McGahern recurrently appeals to humour, complementing confession and deep reflection in both his works, as well as interviews, essays and subsequent debates.

⁵⁴ McGahern, *Memoir*, 84.

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Vom Humor im Leben „berührt“: Figuren in John McGaherns Werken

Abstract: Im Werk von John McGahern gibt es sowohl komische als auch tragische Figuren, die bisher nicht untersucht wurden. Ihre Existenz hängt davon ab, welche Strategie der Autor ihnen gegenüber wählt: Milde, Ironie oder Sarkasmus. Zwischen Automatismen und Mobilitäten, die oft dogmatisch werden oder zu mentalen Stereotypen führen, zeigen die Protago-

nisten, seien sie Kleriker, Arbeiter, Lehrer, Schriftsteller oder Familienangehörige, ihre Ignoranz, vorübergehenden Mangel an guten Manieren, Langeweile oder Gelehrsamkeit und imitieren häufig das, was als „anständig“ bezeichnet werden kann. Dieser Aufsatz befasst sich mit der Art, wie Gesellschaftsklassen, Geschlecht und falsche Ansprüche in den Erzählungen und Romanen dargestellt und lächerlich gemacht werden. Er verfolgt aber auch, wie das Lachen (das Komische) als Mittel eines realistischen Prosaautors sich von der klassischen kantianischen Perspektive des Spiels zu einer Freudschen Analyse von Verdichtung und Mehrdeutigkeit bewegt. Die Erzählperspektive schwankt oft zwischen Familienrollen und Machtpolen, das Lachen wird sichtbar und unsichtbar, genauso natürlich und veränderbar (oder hybrid) wie die menschliche Natur. Die Beispiele aus McGaherns Romanen, Kurzgeschichten, Memoiren und Essays zeigen Unterschiede im Handeln der Protagonisten solche wie Nachahmung und Wiederholung als Attribute von Routine und Versagen, während Angst und Gewalt auf einem reaktiven, unsensiblen Verhalten beruhen, was narrativ unterschiedlich (kurz oder lang) manifestiert. Solche Erfahrungen – von anderen geteilt oder nicht – nuancieren die irische Identität, die Mischung aus Humor und Realismus lädt zu einer weiteren Lektüre ein und verbindet McGaherns Werke zum Beispiel mit Psychoanalyse, engelhaftem bzw. dämonischem Lachen und sogar mit karnevalistischem Lachen.

Schlüsselwörter: John McGahern, das Narrative, der Humor, das Lachen.

Życie „naznaczone” humorem: bohaterowie dzieł Johna McGaherna

Abstrakt: W twórczości Johna McGaherna pojawiają się zarówno postaci komiczne, jak i tragiczne. Temat ten nie był wcześniej eksplorowany. Ich istnienie ujawnia się w zależności od tego, jak łagodnie, ironicznie lub sarkastycznie traktuje je autor. Pomiędzy automatyzmami i mobilnościami, często stającymi się dogmatyczne lub prowadzącymi do mentalnych stereotypów, bohaterowie (czy to duchowni, robotnicy, nauczyciele, pisarze, czy członkowie rodziny) manifestują ignorancję, chwilowy brak dobrych manier, nudę lub erudycję, a często naśladują to, co można nazwać „przyzwoitością”.

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie sposobów prezentacji klas społecznych, płci i fałszywych przekonań, szczególnie sposobu ich wyśmiewania w utworach prozatorskich irlandzkiego pisarza. Jak wynika z przeprowadzonych badań, śmiech (komizm) przechodzi rodzaj transformacji od klasycznej kantowskiej optyki gry do freudowskiej analizy kondensacji i wieloznaczności. Również perspektywa narracyjna często oscyluje pomiędzy rolami rodzinnymi a biegunami władzy, a wraz z nią śmiech, który raz jest widoczny a innym razem niewidoczny, naturalny i podlegający zmianom (lub hybrydowy) jak ludzka natura.

Przykłady z powieści, opowiadań, wspomnień i esejów McGaherna ujawniają różnice w działaniach bohaterów, takie jak naśladowanie i powtarzanie jako atrybuty rutyny i porażki, oraz strach i przemoc opierające się na reaktywnych, nieczułych zachowaniach, co wpływa na długość narracji. Takie doświadczenia – dzielone lub nie przez innych – podtrzymują irlandzką tożsamość, a mieszanka humoru i realizmu zachęca do dalszej lektury, łącząc prace McGaherna na przykład z psychoanalizą, śmiechem anielskim lub demonicznym, a nawet śmiechem karnawałowym (Alfie Bown).

Słowa kluczowe: John McGahern, narracja, humor, śmiech.