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Theme and form in the novels of Edward A. McCourt.

Neil Graham
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THEME AND FORM
IN THE NOVELS OF
EDWARD A. McCOURT

BY
NEIL GRAHAM

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

Edward McCourt is a Canadian novelist who has received only cursory attention from the critics. Reviewers of his novels, so long dominated by a search for Canadian content in Canadian writers, have labelled him a "prairie realist" and seemingly given him a rank somewhere behind W. O. Mitchell and Sinclair Ross as a painter of the local scene. Unfortunately, however, this superficial assessment has concealed rather than revealed the deeper and more significant values of McCourt's fiction, for essentially he is less a realistic than a symbolist novelist.

In his novels McCourt moves beyond mere landscape description and beyond concern with transitory social problems to explore what he believes to be the universal and permanent conditions of life. Consequently, while his setting, plots, and characters may be viewed superficially and realistically, they are more important as symbolic functions of his theme. Hence McCourt's theme, which is consistent throughout all five novels, becomes the shaping force of his fiction.

McCourt sees man's state as dualistic, each man being not only a part of all men but also a unique individual. To illustrate this concept, he refers to Donne's famous comment that "No man is an island," and to Conrad's that "We live, as we dream, alone" as the "two truths" of life. For McCourt these two conditions create not a contradiction in man's state, but a paradox: each individual is ultimately alone, ultimately a "self," yet this sense of "self" is acquired essentially through inter-
action with others. Thus unlike other writers, such as Virginia Woolf, who see interaction with others as decreasing the sense of "self," McCourt sees the two conditions as interdependent. However, a satisfactory existence, a satisfactory dualism, is impossible to achieve unless the individual has or develops what McCourt calls a "faith," for without a faith, interaction and commitment become meaningless, and the individual, unable to achieve a sense of self, becomes paralysed in his isolation, his aloneness. Faith then becomes the key to McCourt's theme.

The necessity of acquiring a faith in something becomes an almost obsessive force at times in McCourt's novels to the extent that creating and perpetuating an illusion is preferable to being without a faith. This "ironic corollary" of McCourt's theme often creates a strange ambivalence in McCourt's novels, an ambivalence which can puzzle and shock the reader.

As might be expected, the results of this thematic approach have been the illumination of certain allegorical aspects in the novels and also a tension between the positive and negative approaches toward faith. Ironically McCourt's symbolistic approach reveals certain Canadian character traits that, while not particularly reassuring or flattering, are perhaps more truly Canadian than those exposed by writers who use the realistic approach. Clearly, the implications in McCourt's fiction are not confined to the prairies.
Introduction

"Edward McCourt has not received his due as one of Canada’s most accomplished novelists," wrote R. G. Baldwin in 1962. Yet today, six years later and after the publication of another McCourt novel, Baldwin’s article remains the only critical treatment of his novels. Two recent critical reference works, Carl F. Klinck’s Literary History of Canada, published in 1965, and Desmond Pacey’s Creative Writing in Canada, revised in 1963, give McCourt only cursory attention: in the section "Canadian Fiction 1940-1960" of the former, Hugo MacPherson devotes part of a sentence to him, and Pacey awards him a full paragraph. This to date then is the full range of serious critical attention, other than reviews, given to the novels of Edward McCourt.

McCourt is the author of five novels. His first, the prize-winning


2 MacPherson’s sentence is as follows: "Two writers who have taken up this (Canadian) search for individual or communal identity deserve mention: they are Roderick Haig-Brown . . . and Saskatchewan English Professor Edward McCourt." He then lists McCourt’s novels, omitting The Wooden Sword, published in 1956.


3 Pacey refers to McCourt as a "regional realist" calling him "the most consistently productive of the (prairie) group, and praises him for "some fine description of the prairie landscape, thoughtful discussion of moral issues and a style which is always competent and at moments reaches genuine distinction." He mentions all of McCourt’s novels, but makes an error in the publication date of The Wooden Sword, 1957 instead of 1956.

Desmond Pacey, Creative Writing in Canada (Toronto, 1963), p. 253.
Music at the Close, was published in 1947. His second novel, Home is the Stranger, published in 1950, was followed by The Wooden Sword in 1956, Walk Through the Valley in 1958, and his latest, Fasting Friar, in 1963. This latter novel was published in England under the title The Ettinger Affair. In addition to his novels, McCourt has also published other types of fiction as well as non-fiction. His other fictional works include two stories for young readers, The Flaming Hour, 1947, and Fusskin Brigadier, 1955, (both about the Riel Rebellion), and numerous short stories, the most recent being "Medicine Woman", published in the Spring, 1966, issue of Queen's Quarterly. He is also the author of a critical text, The Canadian West in Fiction, published in 1949, and a number of critical essays on such writers as Thomas Hardy, Rupert Brooke, and Susannah Moodie. Three other longer works include The Road Across Canada, 1963, Saskatchewan, 1968, both of which are travel books, and a biography of Sir William Butler, Remember Butler, 1967.

On the whole, McCourt's novels have elicited little enthusiasm from critics and reviewers who too often in the past have equated the value of a work with its Canadian content. Perhaps this explains why his travel book, The Road Across Canada was particularly well received.

4 Hopefully we are now moving away from this type of nationalistic criticism, in spite of the surge of nationalism aroused by Centennial year. It is still possible, however, to read reviews which carry on this type of criticism. In his recent review of Hugh MacLennan's The Return of the Sphinx, Arnold Edimbrough states that "in his search for significant Canadian themes, MacLennan is to be admired." Saturday Night, 82 (October, 1967), 49. Twenty years ago, in his critical work, The Canadian West in Fiction, McCourt disparaged nationalistic criticism:

The colonial spirit has given way to something which is equally an obstacle to the development of good literature — a strident nationalism which demands that the writer be aggressively Canadian, that he employ Canadian themes . . . that he develop a
Thus McCourt has been labelled a "prairie novelist" and described as a "regional realist". Baldwin carries the process one step farther:

Critics have not been prepared to admit, however, that their author is anything more than an accurate observer of the prairie scene . . . . most critics live in the East and find they can manage perfectly well without the prairie scene, accurately observed or not.5

Yet to label McCourt a "prairie realist" is at best a slight to his work, and at worst a distortion of its worth. Just as Joseph Conrad resented being called "a spinner of sea-yarns" 6, so McCourt, who has been strongly influenced by Conrad, must feel to be called a writer of prairie stories, or worse, "an accurate observer of the prairie scene". In his hands the prairie is transformed into a symbol, a symbol which he uses to develop a theme going beyond the immediate to the very nature of man himself:

Silence and solitude . . . . nowhere, I think, is it possible for man to know better his littleness and greatness — that is to know himself better . . . . everywhere there are things to

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distinctive Canadian prose — that, in short, he exercise his talents in the manner advocated by shrill-voiced American critics of one hundred and fifty years ago. (p. 113.)

5 Baldwin, p. 574.

6 In a letter to Richard Curle (July 14, 1923), Conrad wrote as follows:

I was in hopes . . . . that it could also be made an opportunity for me to get freed from that infernal tale of ships, and that obsession of my sea life which has about as much bearing on my literary existence, on my quality as a writer, as the enumeration of drawing-rooms which Thackeray frequented could have had on his gift as a great novelist.


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be seen and felt that exalt or soothe the sensitive spirit . . . the occasional vista when a man sees all the kingdoms of the earth stretched out at his feet and feels himself a creature of utter insignificance in the sum of things or else the very centre of the universe.

7 Edward McCourt, Saskatchewan (Toronto, 1968), pp. 20 and 224.
CHAPTER 1

THEORY: THE SHAPING OF MCCOURT'S NOVELS

Edward McCourt is a self-conscious novelist who writes with the critical eye of a man fully conversant with English literature. He was already forty years old and had been a university professor for a number of years when his first novel, *Music at the Close*, was published in 1947. He followed this only two years later with a critical work, *The Canadian West in Fiction*, which included not only a critical evaluation of Western Canadian novelists from Grove to Mitchell and Ross, but also his own mature concepts of the function of the novel and the role of the novelist. Consequently, with McCourt there occurs the rather unusual situation of a novelist who reached a fully developed critical position before he had written much, a reversal of the usual evolution of writers.

This early critical maturation of his theory of the function of the novel and the role of the novelist has had a marked effect on his work. Primarily, it has made it thematically consistent in the sense that his fifth and latest novel has at its core the same concern as the first: individual isolation and commitment. Desmond Pacey notes this situation in McCourt's novels but does not examine the cause of it. He is disappointed that McCourt's "later work has not brought the degree of growth that his first novel might have led us to expect."¹

¹ *Creative Writing in Canada*, p. 225.
Even Baldwin, who analyses the conceptual pattern in McCourt's novels, comes to a surprised and rather hesitant conclusion that "it is almost as if he had only one story to tell." In their disappointment at not being able to find any development in McCourt's fiction, both Pacey and Baldwin have missed seeing that this point is critically significant in his work. It is apparent that by the time McCourt did begin writing novels he had come to the conclusion that ultimately there is only one story to tell, and he comments himself that "repetition is a powerful implement of persuasion."  

For McCourt the novel is a serious art form which has deteriorated because of the problem of communication facing the contemporary artist.

Today the English novel is a trivial thing. For the anxiety of the novelist to communicate in a time when the channels of communication have so largely broken down has in many instances resulted in his ceasing to be an artist at all.

While McCourt does not explain what he means by the problem of communication, the American critic, David Daiches, used this problem as the basis of his critical work, The Novel and the Modern World. What he says about it both clarifies and differentiates McCourt's position. In the 1939 edition Daiches comments as follows:

Without that community of belief which gives confidence to the artist in his view of the significant — confidence that the public will see what he means, will understand his selection — and which provides that basis for all kinds of cultural communication (for culture is essentially a special-

2 Baldwin, p. 587.

3 The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 115.

4 Ibid., p. 120.
ised form of communication possible only with reference to a common background of belief), art cannot flourish . . . . One by one the preconceptions of our forefathers have been shattered and instead of being replaced naturally with new belief . . . . they have been replaced by nothing . . . . what ought to have been a brave new world has turned out a waste­land. 6

Yet while Daiches thought he saw "the beginning of the end of the trans­ition period . . . already foreshadowed by those writers who have shown and are showing themselves alive to the great social issues of our day and all that those issues involve," 6 McCourt disparaged the use of the novel for mere social propaganda.

He (the novelist) has accepted the dictum of H. G. Wells, that the novel shall be 'the parade of morals and the ex­change of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas', and that it is the function of the novelist to 'discuss, point out, plead and display'. But the innumerable pres­sures of a world's confusion have driven him to concentrate on the problems of life rather than life itself. He has turned historian, political scientist, sociologist, theo­logian . . . . few of these novels have much validity as works of art because the authors are primarily concerned with the illumination of the social problem . . . . Granted a solution to the social problems, the novels will be for­gotten too. 7

By 1960 Daiches reverses his 1939 position and in a new, revised edition of The Novel and the Modern World comes to this conclusion also:

Those novelists who were content . . . to emphasize the social documentary aspect of their art . . . often produced interesting and skillful novels, but novels which are now more documents of interest to the social historian . . . than illuminating explorations of the human situation. Virginia Woolf called Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy


6 Ibid.

7 The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 120.
'materialists' and complained that their work never really captured the inward vision.

Thus both critics believe that some writers, in concentrating on transitional social problems, have neglected the true function of the artist, which is to write about permanent human conditions. Daiches refers to it as "the human situation" and McCourt describes it as the "imaginative recreation of life," the "first business of the novelist."9

Daiches suggests two ways in which sensitive artists have met the challenge of collapsing values and communication: there are those who, like Joyce, see the fragmentation of values as the new meaning or "faith" and attempt to incorporate this into an art form through emphasis on technical experimentation, and those who, like Woolf, make "a personal sense of belief persuasive to the reader."10 McCourt belongs to the latter category of novelist; he is no social propagandist, and of Joyce he says "he escaped the wasteland only by creating a private world of his own and communicating his experience of it on his own terms."11

Although ultimately all belief is essentially "personal", McCourt's theory parallels some theories of writers like Matthew Arnold and William Faulkner.12 Writing nearly one hundred years earlier, Arnold

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8 Daiches, p. 7 (rev. ed.)
9 The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 120.
10 Daiches, p. 5 (rev. ed.)
11 The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 120.
12 One of McCourt's reviewers of Walk Through the Valley, Eliot Gose, quotes a passage from the text and then comments, "anyone read The Bear recently?", which, however disparaging the inference, emphasizes the thematic connection between McCourt and Faulkner. Eliot Gose, "Review of Walk Through the Valley," Canadian Literature, 1 (Summer, 1959), 79.
comments that

... amid the bewildering confusion of our times ...

we have the domestic epic dealing with the details of modern life which passes daily under our eyes; we have poems representing modern personages in contact with the problems of modern life, moral, intellectual, and social . . . .

and he advises the writer to try to "escape the danger of producing poetical works conceived in the spirit of the passing time, and which partake of its intellectual and social transitoriness", for the true artist attempts "to affect what is permanent in the human soul."  

Although Arnold is speaking here primarily of poetry, it is obvious that McCourt sees the same high purpose for the novel. It is this same high purpose which William Faulkner spoke of in this 1950 address, "On Receiving the Nobel Prize":

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it . . . . Because of this the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because it is the only thing worth writing about . . . . He must learn them again. He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed — love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice . . . . Until he relearns these things he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man . . . . (Instead) he (man) is immortal . . . . because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things.  

14 Ibid., p. 418.  
At the end of The Canadian West in Fiction, McCourt states that "if life is to be endurable we must ... (assume) the eventual emergence of a settled order and the recovery of a faith." In the meantime, in this modern wasteland, faith must be recovered somehow by the individual himself. This is the essence of McCourt’s fiction.

16 The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 127. The non-literary shaping force of McCourt’s attitude concerning faith seems to have its roots in the Depression, a time which shaped the lives of so many prairie people. McCourt connects the Depression and his idea of faith in his latest work, Saskatchewan:

For the people of Saskatchewan that nine year’s sojourn in a dust-darkened wilderness was a genuinely traumatic experience which has left its mark not only on those who actually lived through it ... but to some degree on their descendants ... The bewilderment and despair of the earlier years had by 1937 given way to a sterner emotion and the people now took a kind of defiant pride in showing the world their strength to endure, without flinching, the worst that nature could do to them. No one could survive nine years of hell without courage, nor without a faith — not in a benevolent god but in one’s own capacity to endure. (p. 5)
CHAPTER II

THEME: VISIONS AND REALITIES

Because he sees the function of the novel as the "recreation of life," McCourt's own concept of life is of paramount importance since it forms the basis of the theme throughout his novels. In *The Canadian West in Fiction* he explains his theory of life in terms of two truths:

Today as at no time in the history of the race we are prepared to acknowledge — with our minds at least — that no man is an island. But in thus proclaiming the universality of us all, we are tending to lose sight of an equally important truth, that each man, in addition to being a part of all men, is a unique individual. Because the spirit of the time compels him, the novelist today is concerned with the universality of man rather than his uniqueness. And in this he is something less than a great artist. The magnificent rhetoric of John Donne expresses a profound truth; but so do the words of Joseph Conrad, "We live, as we dream, alone."\(^1\)

Although McCourt was aware when he wrote these lines that Donne's statement had already become a cliché, as one of his characters says, "Thanks to Hemingway,"\(^2\) he is not averse to clichés when they contain what he would term the truth. And neither would he mind then that the fiction of the past twenty years has made a cliché out of Conrad's statement about individual aloneness. What he would mind, however, is that modern fiction has placed almost exclusive emphasis on individual

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1 *The Canadian West in Fiction*, p. 120.


11
isolation as the truth, rather than as one of the two truths about life. Thus comments such as Daiches' that "much modern fiction is the charting of the way out of a solipsism" or William Frierson's statement that "Writers overwhelmed with a sense of collapse of their world . . . (have) retired into a private world detached from social reality" only partly apply to McCourt's fiction, for just as important as aloneness and isolation of individual man is the other "truth", that man must interact with his fellow man, that he must be socially committed. McCourt's characters may attempt to live entirely in egocentric worlds, but they become increasingly unhappy, alienated and paralyzed until they eventually find some commitment to their fellow men.

What McCourt is saying about the state of man through the references to Donne and Conrad has been the subject of much psychological probing in recent years. In a 1962 anthology of modern essays on the subject of isolation and commitment called Man Alone, the Introduction contains the following comments on modern man as seen in recent literature:

This theme of the alienation of modern man runs through the literature and drama of two continents . . . ties have snapped that formerly bound Western man to himself and to the world about him . . . . In modern terms alienation has been used . . . to refer to a variety of psycho-social disorders, including loss of self, anxiety states, anomie, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, social disorganization, loneliness, atomization, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, pessimism, and the loss of beliefs or values . . . . Central to the definition of alienation is the idea that man has lost his identity or 'self-

3 Daiches, p. 10 (rev. ed.)

hood. Many writers who deal with the problem of self-alienation assume, implicitly or explicitly, that in each of us is a 'genuine', 'real' or 'spontaneous' self which we are prevented from knowing or achieving. But how does one achieve selfhood? The most satisfactory answer has been provided by social psychologists, notably Charles H. Cooley and George H. Mead, who argue that one acquires self or identity through interaction with others . . . . A person who experiences self-alienation is not only cut off from the springs of his own creativity but is thereby also cut off from the groups of which he would otherwise be a part; and he who fails to achieve a meaningful relationship with others is deprived of some part of himself.  

In psychological terms this is precisely McCourt's point about the "two truths": man's dual condition is not a dichotomy, an unresolvable dilemma, but one of paradoxical interdependence. If man is completely alone, then he cannot be completely conscious of selfhood; instead there is a loss of selfhood, for the self achieves its identity through interaction with others. This is the paradox of man's state. Identity comes from the outside, not the inside.

This is why McCourt is essentially different from Virginia Woolf and Joseph Conrad, both of whom he obviously admires. They saw the problem of isolation and interaction, or "loneliness and community" as Daiches calls them, in terms of ambiguity and dilemma because they belong to that group of writers who "assume . . . that in each of us


6 McCourt refers favourably a number of times in The Canadian West in Fiction to both Virginia Woolf and Joseph Conrad. The title of his latest novel, Fasting Friar, has a rather circuitous relationship to Virginia Woolf. It is based on a phrase used in Meredith's The Egoist to refer to the main character, Vernon Whitford, who was patterned after Virginia Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen.

7 Daiches, p. 10 (rev. ed.)
is a genuine or real self." Consequently they went inward to find it rather than outward. Virginia Woolf and Joseph Conrad see one state or "truth" as encroaching on the other. In Mrs. Dalloway, the main character is alone and lonely, but in trying to communicate with others she is afraid of losing her individuality. She wants contact with others; she wants love; but she is afraid it will reduce her freedom; she wants to keep the self inviolable. Yet, in this same novel, we have another character, Septimus Warren Smith, who eventually commits suicide because he cannot respond to the reality of the existence of other people. Conrad, too, in Nostromo shows the individual's inability to live with the isolated self by having Decoud commit suicide; clearly commitment is necessary, but Conrad saw it as corrupting the inviolable self. In general, Virginia Woolf became more subtle and Conrad more ambiguous in their treatment of what they saw as essentially a dilemma, not a paradox, of human existence.

McCourt's own characters at first see life in much the same manner as Conrad's. Steven Venner, in The Wooden Sword, refers to this dual condition of man as "the eternal dilemma," and Walter Ackroyd, in Fasting Friar, believes, quoting Hyst in Conrad's Victory, that "He who forms a tie is lost." Both of these comments occur, however, very early in each novel, and by the end in each case the character discovers that man's state is a paradox -- aloneness and community are the two truths about life; one does not negate the other;

8 The Wooden Sword, p. 38.
9 Fasting Friar, p. 51.
both are necessary for the "whole" man, and they must interact, for commitment gives self identity. He who does not form a tie is lost.

McCourt's theory of the "two truths" of life leads directly to his theme, the theme which he has developed in every one of his novels, which is essentially the particular way he envisions the individual integrating aloneness and commitment, a way which does not end in ambiguity and dilemma. He believes that the whole structure of life rests on having a faith, for without a faith it is impossible for the individual to commit himself to life; instead there occurs a deepening alienation, paralysis of will and action, and ultimately meaningfulness and loss of any sense of self. The psychiatrist who speaks to the main character, Steven Venner, in The Wooden Sword, could actually be giving advice to all of McCourt's main characters:

The corridors of the mind are full of locked doors . . . Only when we open the door, pierce the veil, can we find peace. To do so needs faith. Faith in something more than the human ego. A psychiatrist can help sometimes. He can interpret the symbols . . . provide the understanding, sympathy. Never the faith. That you must find yourself. 10

In this era when all old accepted faiths, values, and traditions are dying, the onus is on the individual to find his own faith, and it must be in "something more than the human ego;" in other words not in something internal but in something external.

What McCourt means by faith can be found in many places throughout his novels, but a conversation between the previously mentioned character, Steven Venner, and an aging colleague of his, Dr. Fotheringham, is perhaps the most explicit statement found anywhere in them. Dr.

10 The Wooden Sword, p. 58.
Fotheringham is a reputable and aging history professor who has asked Steven to read some poetry he has written, "his essence distilled into a dozen pages of verse . . . all that matters." Steven comes to see him to return the poems and their conversation eventually reaches the subject of faith:

"I have come to the conclusion, by no means an original one," Dr. Fotheringham said heavily, "that the life of every man is no more than a succession of disillusionments. Each disillusionment constitutes a crisis. And a man's happiness—a relative term only—depends on the success or otherwise with which he meets each crisis." And he added, speaking slowly, almost with pain. "Growing old, Venner, means only loss of faith."

"Perhaps," said Steven. But loss of faith in what?"

"Sit down a moment, Venner. A favourite theme of mine. I should have been a philosopher, though I'm sure Professor Campion wouldn't agree. But consider the pattern of the ordinary man's life. Consider it in terms of what he believes. Tell me, Venner, have you ever suffered greater pain, or more enduring, than when you found out there was no Santa Claus?"

"The pain was great," Steven said, smiling, "but I don't think it endured."

"I am using Santa Claus as a symbol only," Dr. Fotheringham said, "a symbol of all things beyond apprehension of the senses and the intellect, which as children we believe in. And later, much later. All things lying outside the range of the natural world. When our belief in those things dies there passes a glory from the earth. And unlike Wordsworth, we never recapture the vision."

Dr. Fotheringham drained his glass. "Then there is the adolescent concept of love, maintained into manhood, till marriage, and perhaps for a long time afterwards. It, too, must go. We come to realise, eventually accept, the fact that romantic love—and all our mores, folk-lore, arts, are designed to glorify it—is a dream, an illusion. Or if we know it for a little while, our pain is all the greater when we find out that it cannot be sustained indefinitely. Love dies, Venner. And with it a part of every man. Perhaps the only part that really matters.

THE LAST DISILLUSIONMENT," he said, "may come very late. Very late indeed. Sometimes not until near the very end.

The Wooden Sword, p. 109.
But sometimes, of course, much earlier, and then the consequences are all the more disastrous. A man comes to doubt his work, Venner. Above all, to recognize his limitations. A bitter hour, when he knows what he cannot do."

Perhaps, Steven thought, he himself had already experienced the last disillusionment. Faith in his power as a teacher, in what he might someday write, was gone. . . . What seemed a loss of faith in his work was no more than a temporary aberration, subject to correction. If he followed the path lit by the invisible sun . . . .

"What keeps us going, then?" he asked, almost eagerly. "What has kept you going?"

Dr. Fotheringham did not answer him at once. "The instinct to survive, no doubt," he said at last. "And something else. The pure flame, the sun within us. The few things we do that we believe in, that we cling to. Not much, perhaps, but all that matters."

Life then is seen as a series of disillusionments, of losses of faiths. First the faiths of childhood go, then those of youth and finally those of maturity, and if we are lucky we end up with "the few things that we do believe in." But the invisible sun, which gets its light from without, can dim and go out prematurely at any age with disastrous consequences. This is precisely what happens or threatens to happen to each of McCourt's main characters. In Music at the Close, the main character, Neil Fraser, comes to envy his friend, Gil, because he "had a faith" and Neil is "filled with a kind of sick despair . . . because . . . there had been things to live for, things that made dying worth while. Now neither life nor death mattered at all."14

12 The Wooden Sword, pp. 112-114.

13 The reference to "the pure flame, the sun within us," had come from an earlier conversation when Steven had mentioned "old Sir Thomas Browne" and his statement that "life is a pure flame and we live by an invisible sun within us," and Dr. Fotheringham had replied, "the light we live by that no one else ever sees." (p. 110)

14 Music at the Close, p. 168.
In *Home is the Stranger*, Norah eventually attempts suicide believing that she must "banish the dreams she lived by for always they played her false."\(^{15}\) In *The Wooden Sword*, Steven Venner finds that "the lights which had guided him from his childhood had gone out one by one,"\(^{16}\) and he becomes "sunk in apathy . . . confounded utterly by his own inadequacies, his inability to make a decisive step which would bring either release or damnation."\(^{17}\) In *Walk Through the Valley*, young Michael comes to the point of despair at an earlier age, almost missing his "Wordsworthian" phase of faith that Dr. Fotheringham referred to in the preceding quotation. "The way ahead was dark like the valley. He thought of the future with horror, with loathing."\(^{18}\) Finally, in *Fasting Friar*, ascetic Walter Ackroyd, who has attempted to make a "faith" out of isolation, comes to the point of despair of existence: "He felt only a sick fear of what lay ahead,"\(^{19}\) and, like Neil Fraser, he envies a friend, for "at least he believed in something."\(^{20}\) Thus all of the characters become examples of Dr. Fotheringham's philosophical comment about faith and its place in living. Furthermore, in each case the characters must regain their faith alone, and McCourt isolates them both mentally and physically, in this age of faithlessness.

\(^{15}\) *Home is the Stranger*, p. 253.
\(^{16}\) *The Wooden Sword*, p. 138.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 219.
\(^{18}\) *Walk Through the Valley*, p. 220.
\(^{19}\) *Fasting Friar*, p. 95.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 178.
Steven could neither live alone nor with others. Not with his colleagues, not with Ruth. Not even with himself. That was the worst of all... He had to face the cloud. The path he must tread alone. All else was trivial, idle dreaming. No hope of reconciliation with his fellows, with Ruth, with himself, until he walked the path alone.21

The method of regaining their faith is seen in terms of a transformation, a sudden relighting of the "invisible sun" which comes in a vision, a moment of clarity, an epiphany. Neil Fraser, who wondered earlier "if he himself would ever find a faith, and if so ... be transformed,"22 eventually has a "flash of illumination."23 Norah has a "vision (that) broke in upon the prosaic logic of her thought, the vision unprompted, which had no relation to anything having previous existence in her consciousness."24 Steven's vision is seen in terms of a symbol, a nightmare cloud or veil he must pierce to get to the light, "for by the light he could see... He plunged forward, arms outstretched to embrace his destiny, broke through darkness into light. He remembered. And he saw."25 Michael sees "a vision glimpsed for a moment only and remembered always."26 Walter Ackroyd's vision is described in terms of a sexual communion raised to the level of an epiphany:

There was no tension in her any more, and no passion.

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21 The Wooden Sword, p. 139.
23 Ibid., p. 226.
24 Home is the Stranger, p. 256.
26 Walk Through the Valley, p. 221.
Only he could feel it like an emanation — a confiding trust that stirred in him an emotion he had never known before . . . She was a symbol, perhaps, of the power that was beginning in some mysterious way to assert a measure of control over him.27

It is through this vision, this moment of clarity, that each of McCourt's characters renews his faith in something, commits himself to a cause or an ideal outside himself and paradoxically acquires a sense of self, an identity. The various faiths acquired are shown to be faith in the power of love, human progress, a principle — the existence of something beyond the transience of everyday life — in other words, "the old verities."

If this were the sum of McCourt's theme, his novels would be quite straightforward quest novels in which the main characters emerge as heroes who triumph over life. Yet another emphasis is apparent, a dark side of his theme which comes mainly from the psychological rather than philosophical orientation he has towards the idea of faith. It is this dark side, which at times overshadows his positive emphasis, that we have termed the "ironic corollary" of his theme. 28

Most of the time McCourt is more concerned with the necessity of acquiring a faith than with the faith itself. His approach, as in The Wooden Sword, which is replete with psychiatrist and anecdotal autobiography therapy, is often close to the case history method of psych-

27 Fasting Friar, p. 170.

28 Baldwin sees no irony in McCourt's novels although he does see irony in some of his short stories. However, with the novels, he states that "some will question whether the truly romantic spirit can ever have a 'normal' development or practical application; others will never accept romance free of ironic assessment." (p. 587). Apparently neither will McCourt.
ology. The psychiatrist in this novel tells the main character in a statement already referred to, "You must find a faith." He is not interested in the "truth" or "value" of the faith, only in that one must have one in order to live adequately. And the psychiatrist, or psychiatrist-substitute (who is, at times, McCourt himself through direct authorial comment), is just as important a character in the novels as philosophers like Dr. Fotheringham. However, even in Dr. Fotheringham's comments an ironic undertone is evident when he states that "romantic love," which is one of our faiths, "is a dream, an illusion." His suggestion seems to be that we are fortunate if we can get to the end of life before we lose all our faiths. Finally, the main characters themselves are surprisingly unconcerned with the truth of their faith or even with what the basis of the faith is so long as it will permit them to act.

He (Steven) was sunk in a kind of apathy, careless of what tomorrow might bring. Could nothing rouse him any more? Or was he now almost content to drift in the current of events, believing, or professing to believe, that the will was a myth, that no exertion on his part could alter the dark river... what he had suffered... had a narcotic effect on his will, deadening its power to act. What was needed now was a new impulse born of some unexpected and overwhelming crisis which would rouse his from his apathy, compel him to act, to exercise, or seem to exercise, that will which, whether real or illusory, was what men lived by.29

Here once again the emphasis is on "what men live by," the psychological rather than the philosophical concern.

In addition to the psychological treatment of character, McCourt has a strong trap motif running through his plots, a motif which em-

29 The Wooden Sword, p. 206.
emphasizes the underlying irony. While it might be expected that the main characters would see themselves as trapped before their moment of vision, Neil Fraser, for example, feeling "a desperate urge to strike out wildly against forces that were herding him inexorably, impersonally, towards extinction," even after the vision the trap motif is either still implied or made explicit. Norah, for example, still feels that "the earth . . . was the enemy of mankind." But the greatest trap of all is often the characters' own personalities, for they are trapped by their need for a faith.

Finally, McCourt's prairie setting becomes the visible expression of the dark forces at work in the universe in much the same way as Hardy's Wessex setting. In fact, in The Canadian West in Fiction, McCourt explains the connection:

If Thomas Hardy is right, few places on the continent are, in this age of bewilderment . . . more completely in harmony with the spirit of man. In that great first chapter of The Return of the Native, Hardy says of Egdon Heath:

'... haggard Egdon appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently learnt emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair.

Indeed, it is a question if the exclusive reign of this orthodox beauty is not approaching its last quarter. The new Vale of Tempe may be a gaunt waste in Thule; human souls may find themselves in closer and closer harmony with external things wearing a somberness distasteful to our race when it was young. The time seems near, if it has not actually arrived, when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking among mankind.' What Hardy says here of Egdon is, almost without modification,

30 Music at the Close, p. 224.

31 Home is the Stranger, p. 261.

32 McCourt may well have been influenced by Hardy's attitudes during his studies at Oxford under Edmund Blunden, the Hardy scholar.
applicable to the prairie scene. 33

Although it might be argued that McCourt uses this "ironic corollary" to make the positive aspect of his theme, that of acquiring a faith, more attractive and ultimately necessary in view of the darkness in the background of human life, it can just as easily be reversed, with the idea of ultimate irony reducing even the concept of a faith to mere escapism.

Thus at times McCourt can be even more unsettling than Virginia Woolf with her subtleties or Conrad with his ambiguities, for it is not difficult to see man, in McCourt's view, as "a poor fork'd animal" who cannot live life without the crutch of a faith, a very flimsy security to protect him against the indifferent or even malignant force of the universe. Therefore, when he writes of the descent into isolation, as in *Music at the Close*, when Neil acquires a faith as he lies dying, "trapped" on the beaches of Normandy, it can be as unsettling to the reader as Lear's dying illusion that Cordelia is alive. And when he writes of the integration of a character into society as he does in *Fasting Friar*, the effect of the underlying irony of life often creates a satirical impression. 34

33 The Canadian West in Fiction, pp. 122-123.

34 Baldwin, ("Review of Fasting Friar," Canadian Forum, 41 [April, 1964], 21) calls the novel "grimly fascinating" — since he will not admit of any irony in McCourt's novels. Arnold Edinborough, ("Review of Fasting Friar," Saturday Night, 79 [March, 1964], 28) makes the following comment, "McCourt ironically falls into his own trap. He obviously decides that a deep analysis of the academic mind grappling with eternal verities . . . (needs) leavening up with sex . . . It is a curious bag of tricks." F. W. Wyatt, ("Review of Fasting Friar," University of Toronto Quarterly, 33 [July 1, 1964], 395) sees it as a "confusion of fictional modes, satire and realism, from which springs
McCourt's novels are clearly theme directed, and how his theme, together with his "ironic corollary", affects the characterization, plot, and setting of his novels will be analyzed in the following chapters.

It is apparent that all of these reviewers have made the error of seeing the novel as plot directed rather than as theme directed and hence have seen it only in part or from the wrong premise.
We have already observed that McCourt's purpose in writing fiction is to "recreate life," and because of his theory of what constitutes life, he writes of character, of people, rather than of transitory social problems. His attitude toward the treatment of character is well expressed in The Canadian West in Fiction.

It is not possible to quarrel seriously with Virginia Woolf's assertion that it is to express character, not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel . . . has been evolved.1

All of the novelists McCourt explores are evaluated for their ability to portray character. He criticizes Sinclair Ross for his "static characters"2 in As For Me And My House, and of Frederick Philip Grove he states, "the power to create living people was denied him."3 On the other hand, Christine Van Der Mark4 is highly praised for her ability to create living people:

1 The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 67.
2 Ibid., p. 97.
3 Ibid., p. 70.

4 Christine Van Der Mark's novel, In Due Season, was published in 1947 by Oxford University Press, Toronto. Its locale is the Peace River District. Of the novel and the novelist, McCourt makes the following comments, many of which might be applied to his own fiction without alteration: "In the light of these conditions surrounding the opening of the new frontier, it is not surprising that so far only one novel has been written which attempts to deal realistically with life in the
The people of her frontier are sometimes courageous and sometimes weak; sometimes fine and sometimes petty; in this they are a part of life. And this is the measure of Christine Van Der Mark's success — that though her people rarely delight, they nearly always convince.5

The same might be said of McCourt's own characters who convince not necessarily because they rarely delight but because of their sheer obsessional consistency.6 Any change in the pattern of their behaviour at the end of each novel would make them utterly unconvincing.7

Peace River District. The author of the novel, Christine Van Der Mark, came to know the district during years spent as a school teacher in its lonelier places. Her attachment to the Peace River country is deep and passionate; happily, when she wrote her novel her artistic sense was sufficiently developed to inform her that a chronicle of stirring events recorded against an appropriately coloured backdrop had neither merit nor meaning. She conceived In Due Season as a work of art in which the character should at all times be her prime concern, and only incidentally as a record of settlement in a new land." (The Canadian West in Fiction, pp. 103-104.) Here McCourt again echoes Matthew Arnold, who stated that "the eternal objects of poetry ... are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves ...." (Matthew Arnold, "Preface to Poems, 1835", Prose of the Victorian Period, ed. with an introd. by William E. Buckler Cambridge, Mass., 1958 , p. 411.)

5 The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 107.

6 McCourt's characters do not fit into either the "flat" or "round" categories of character explained by E.M. Forster in Aspects of the Novel. Forster's distinction is that "the test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round." McCourt's characters do not surprise because they develop only in one direction, a direction predetermined from the beginning, yet they are convincing; in other words, flat but convincing characters. On the whole, however, McCourt's characters are closer to being flat than round. If we recall McCourt's statement about the novel being an enduring work of art, the following statement by Forster would suggest that McCourt is more a flat character novelist: "All of us yearn for permanence ... and permanence is the chief excuse for a work of art. We all want books to endure ... and their inhabitants to be the same, and flat characters tend to justify themselves on this account." (E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel London, 1927 , pp. 75, 67.)

7 Baldwin takes a similar stand in answer to McCourt's reviewers

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McCourt's characters are flesh and blood embodiments of his theme: they are all highly idealistic individuals who become either paralyzed or at least incapacitated by life until in a moment of illumination, of insight, of vision, they find a faith which enables them to commit themselves to life and achieve a greater sense of selfhood. Baldwin comes to the conclusion that "the romantic dream must have an application," but to label these characters as romantics and conclude that McCourt himself is a romantic, as Baldwin does, is to underestimate McCourt's achievement.

Because the theme is concerned with the inner and outer state of man, McCourt's point of view toward his main characters switches between the objective and the subjective. All other characters in the novels are treated objectively, and in this regard they are seen from the outside in much the same way as the main characters see them. Consequently, they are developed only insofar as one of the main characters might deepen his understanding of them.

A comparison of the five main characters shows that in spite of a surface dissimilarity, they have a great deal in common, a fact that in itself would suggest that they are thematic personifications. Externally they are seen as two farm boys, a young immigrant Scottish housewife, and two university professors. Internally, however, they are psychological soulmates. All of them suffer, in varying degrees who have often said that the endings of his novels ruin them: "The endings of two of his books have in particular been badly received . . . . It is more likely, surely, that these romantic episodes, quite the reverse of shattering his novels, in fact fulfil a promise incorporated in them — and indeed, in his work as a whole." (p. 581).

8 Baldwin, p. 585.
of intensity, from an anxiety neurosis which is the result of their highly tuned imaginations and feelings of isolation and aloneness. 

Now, while this state or feeling exists to some degree in all men, and particularly in modern man with whom anxiety neurosis is an endemic psychological disorder, in these characters it exists to a high degree, an obsessional degree, all of them coming eventually to the point of paralysis. Alan Bevan in his "Introduction" to the New Canadian Library edition of Music at the Close calls the main character, Neil Fraser, a "prairie Prufrock;" 9 however, it must be noted that unlike Prufrock these characters have within them the ability to find their way out of "the wasteland." Actually they are all closer to Neil's wife's description of him as a "Sir Galahad . . . chasing the Holy Grail." 10

The childhood of each of the main characters forms an important part of each novel, and because of McCourt's psychological approach, it is a significant area of concern since we see that the lives of the characters were given their direction at this time. They have had remarkably similar childhoods. All have been through the traumatic experience of losing one or both parents at an early impressionable age. Neil Fraser is orphaned at the age of twelve when the novel begins. Morsb, in Home is the Stranger, is actually orphaned twice, once with the death of her parents and again in the war with the death by bombing of her aunt and uncle with whom she had lived. Steven Venner's mother had died when he was twelve and he was only slightly older when his

10 Music at the Close, p. 104.
favourite uncle died, a shock, since Steven was not close to his father. Michael, in *Walk Through the Valley*, is only fourteen at the end of the novel when he sees his father shot. Finally, Walter Ackroyd lost his mother sometime during his childhood, and he says in referring to it, "then there wasn't really anyone." Thus at an early age they were all made aware of their aloneness, their isolation, in the deepest way, through the deaths of those closest to them. Both Neil Fraser and Norah are made even more aware of their state by being immediately thrust into new surroundings, Neil moving from Ontario to the prairies to live with an aunt and uncle he has never seen, and Norah emigrating from Scotland to the prairies when she marries her Canadian airman, Jim. For a child or young person this situation would create an indelible impression; but for McCourt's characters, who are hypersensitive and hyperimaginative, it is the beginning of fear and their "walk through the valley."

They become five characters in search or a faith.

The psychiatrist in *The Wooden Sword*, in speaking to Steven Venner, suggests that his case, and that of the four other characters it might be added, is hardly unique. He explains the situation and its effects in psychological terms:

You have learned that you were a child romantic and timid and fearful of death. Abnormally fearful of death . . . . So you life and so you dream . . . . You are sensitive, fundamentally unhappy. And so you dream through childhood and adolescence. At a time when the adolescent, the youth growing into manhood, banishes utterly the dream and rejoices for a little time at least in the reality of sex, you were moving the other way. Retreating.  

11 *Fasting Friar*, p. 136.

12 *The Wooden Sword*, pps. 187-188.
But it is not only the reality of sex that these characters retreat from; it is the reality of everything with which they come into contact. They build protective walls around themselves and like Ackroyd believe that "if he stayed behind the bulwarks nothing could touch him."13

As a result of the exposure of their sensitive natures to more than the usual number of childhood traumas, few characters are as full of fear as McCourt's. As a twelve year old child, Neil Fraser arrives on the prairies to live with an aunt and uncle he has never seen, and as he looks out of the window that first night "the immensity of the darkness appalled him."14 Norah stumbles along with Jim, her fiance, after the death of her aunt and uncle in a bombing raid, "a nightmare-haunted child."15 Steven's fear comes in the form of a grim picture: "Grandad died, Mother died, and death was corruption, bare bones white in the sunlight."16 Young Michael emerges as the most normal of McCourt's main characters. The death of his father is followed so soon by his "vision" that he has little opportunity to descend into isolation. He feels only "a faint chill of fear — of the future."17 Earlier, however, even before his father's death, he had "stumbled upon fear"18 in the valley where "mossy creepers, dark and green and gray . . . made him

13 Fasting Friar, p. 52.
14 Music at the Close, p. 12.
15 Home is the Stranger, p. 14.
16 The Wooden Sword, p. 71.
17 Walk Through the Valley, p. 215.
18 Ibid.
think, reluctantly, of pictures he had seen of primaevul swamps in the first ages of time. Walter Ackroyd finally comes to see that his proud isolation was actually based not on his disdain of everyday life but on his fear of it: "You knew I was afraid Marion . . . . but you see I was afraid for myself." Norah speaks for them all when she states that fear seemed to be "inextricably a part of her being."

The combination of their romantic natures and their fear blights all aspects of their lives, although with Michael the blight is short-lived. Neil Fraser, after dreaming of being successful at university, at writing, at farming, and in his marriage, fails when tested by the reality of them, and eventually he gives up: "I've hit my level and I'll just stay there. I just don't seem to care any more." Norah dreams of being the perfect wife and mother but she fails in both roles. She cannot communicate with her unromantic husband or her unresponsive prairie neighbours, and her fear of being alone leads her to adultery. The reality of this experience shatters her further, and when her son contracts pneumonia and dies because of her lack of attention, she breaks down completely. Steven Venner charges off to war with the romantic Eighth Army in the African desert only to be so shattered by the horror of the reality of war that he escapes into amnesia. His subconscious fear of remembering the experience eventually renders him physically

19 Walk Through the Valley, p. 24.
20 Fasting Friar, p. 220.
21 Home is the Stranger, p. 262.
22 Music at the Close, p. 173.
impotent with his wife and unable to communicate with his colleagues. Michael, as we mentioned, is on the verge of the same paralysis, seeing the future "with horror and loathing, a future full of pain." Because of the death of his father, he feels alone, unable to communicate with his more practical mother and sister. Walter Ackroyd is leading a sort of non-existence hiding behind the walls of a university and concentrating on pure scholarship. "The grey walls held all of life that had meaning and design. Beyond lay disorder, triviality, and a loneliness that was without logical origin." He has even managed to live without sex: "Sex was one of the basic urges of man he had long since disciplined to his will." All of the characters, then, become isolated and alone, unhealthily egocentric to the extent that they are paralysed and unable to exert their wills. They must move back toward some commitment in life. But commitment is impossible without a faith, which for all of McCourt's characters comes in a flash of insight into the meaning of existence.

There is a consistency about these characters even in the means by which they achieve their faith and in the type of faith they find. Neil's "flash of insight" as he lies dying on the beach shows him that

\[ \ldots \because he died, and thousands and millions like him, man would not at once be unchained. But he and his fellows \]

\[ 23 \textit{Walk Through the Valley}, p. 220. \]
\[ 24 \textit{Fasting Friar}, p. 11. \]
\[ 25 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 26. \]
\[ 26 \textit{Music at the Close}, p. 226. \]
had made a contribution, however blindly, however unwillingly to a struggle that might last a thousand years.27

Norah's "vision unprompted, which had no relation to anything having previous existence in her consciousness"28 as she lies freezing on the prairie is that

... by fighting she could escape that final degradation of the human spirit to which less than an hour ago she had committed herself — acquiescence in the plan of destiny.29

Steven's "light came; illumination which seemed to form around the words mixed chaotically in his mind"30 as he sits contemplating suicide, and as a result he is able to "see his way clearly."31 The result of this experience for each of them is commitment, Neil to man, Norah to her husband, and Steven to his wife, and an enhanced sense of identity and selfhood.

Michael's vision is described in terms of a pure Wordsworthian experience:

The thoughts in his brain ceased . . . annihilated by the surge of the strongest emotion he had ever known. On the arched summit of a high butte that formed a part of the farther valley wall the great stag stood against the sky. Immense and lonely he seemed in the cold pale light that lay around him, a creature not of the earth his feet so lightly touched, but a mysterious visitor from some region of heroes of an age long past. And as the boy stared in rapture the buck turned slowly his magnificent antlered head and looked at him across the gulf of earth and time . . . . He knew dimly he would never be the same again. For he had seen them (the valley, hilltop, and the sky) in the

27 Music at the Close, p. 227.
28 Home is the Stranger, p. 256.
29 Ibid., p. 257.
30 The Wooden Sword, p. 222.
31 Ibid., p. 223.
light of something great and strange and enduring — of
a vision glimpsed for a moment only, and remembered always.32

Walter Ackroyd's vision, which permits him to commit himself to
life, is revealed to him through "the unbearable ecstasy of physical
love."33 He finds afterwards that he has the will to fight for an
academic principle and for Marion's love.

For each of these characters, with the achievement of a faith,
faith chiefly in the human spirit, their fears are banished or at least
made manageable. Neil finds it "strange that in the last hour of his
life he could be so completely free from fear."34 Norah recognizes that
"Her sin was fear. All her life she had lived in fear."35 But by dis­
covering this, she at least knew which enemy she had to fight now.
Steven, as it turns out, has always been afraid of his own cowardice,
and after his vision he is elated because his comrades give him back
his wooden sword (a symbol of his courage) and he finds "that the terror
had for all time passed away."36 Michael discovers, too, that "the
fear and the pain were gone . . . (they) would come back. But he could
beat them now. He could always beat them now."37 After his experience,

32 Walk Through the Valley, p. 221. It might be noted here that
if the other characters had had a mystical experience when they were
Michael's age, they perhaps might not have carried their intense ro­
manticism into their later lives. Michael says after it, "He knew
only, in the moment of exaltation, that the power was in him henceforth
to defy the worst that life could do to him." (Ibid.).

33 Fasting Friar, p. 217.
34 Music at the Close, p. 226.
35 Home is the Stranger, p. 265.
36 The Wooden Sword, p. 250.
37 Walk Through the Valley, p. 221.
Walter Ackroyd finds that he can go to the window and look out at the prairie without the familiar sense of fear: "There was nothing to see except a few farmhouse lights dotting the darkness."38

Thus all of the characters become living embodiments of McCourt's theme that a faith is the only way to life with the "two truths" of life. On this level, each of his novels can be seen as a type of contemporary Pilgrim's Progress, a moral exemplum for a society of alienated individuals who walk through the wasteland.

Yet there is another dimension to McCourt's treatment of his characters, a dimension which emphasizes the "ironic corollary" of his theme. There are times when the characters are seen from the outside; that is, from the psychiatrist or psychiatrist-substitute point of view.39 The result is to turn the main characters into ironic figures, since the reader is allowed to look down upon them, knowing more about them than they know themselves and seeing them in the role of patient or interesting neurotic. The only novel that is relatively free from this is Walk Through the Valley, and the reason is mainly that Michael's behaviour is more acceptable in a very young person, both to the reader and seemingly to McCourt.

McCourt's direct authorial comments may be largely explained on the basis of his theme, for until the characters achieve their moment of vision and begin to live the other truth about life, he himself is

38 Fasting Friar, p. 213.

39 E. M. Forster discusses the shifting point of view technique and states that it is acceptable if the writer is strong enough to "bounce" the reader without interfering with the narrative. On the other hand, he quotes Percy Lubbock as saying that the point of view should be consistent. (p.75). Lubbock would no doubt then see this as a weakness in McCourt's fiction.
not sympathetic with their egocentricity. The problem is that the visions come so late in his novels that the reader may not notice that his ironic comments cease afterward. In any case, there is still an element of irony inherent in McCourt's attitude even when he sympathizes and approves his characters' behaviour, since they are still seen juxtaposed against an indifferent or even malignant universe which ultimately makes all human actions ironic. In Music at the Close, after witnessing Neil's descent into isolation because of his romantic nature and fear of facing up to reality, the reader is inclined to agree with comments such as that of Neil's wife, Moira, when she tells him, "if you're honest you'll admit that most of what's happened is your own fault," or his friend, Gil, who says, "don't you think it's time you grew up?" McCourt himself interposes comments which show that he, too, sees Neil from a point of view similar to that of the other characters: "For once he (Neil) acted with decision;" "It did not occur to him that his defiance had stemmed from anything other than stern moral courage;" "It was natural that Neil made no attempt to analyse his feelings toward either of his deities;" Characteristically, he expressed his feelings in an outburst of senseless anger." At times McCourt (and the reader as well) sees Neil from an omniscient point of

40 Music at the Close, p. 193.
41 Ibid., p. 110.
42 Ibid., p. 22.
43 Ibid., p. 23.
44 Ibid., p. 50.
view, "But of this, Neil, dreaming his dreams, knew nothing," and he becomes a pawn, a victim of forces beyond himself.

In *Home is the Stranger* we agree with the statements of Norah's friend, Gail, and her romantic hero, Mallory, when they tell Norah that she is being foolish, or that she has nothing to be ashamed of because she is afraid. Comment has already been made on the psychiatrist in *The Wooden Sword*, who becomes the norm and consequently with whom there is more likely to be identification on the part of the reader.

Often, too, the minor characters, even though they are not developed in McCourt's novels, have achieved more satisfying lives than the highly imaginative main characters. Neil's wife, Norah's husband, and Steven's wife are all seen as much less complicated people who are obviously more happy and contented. Some characters, like Neil's unimaginative farmer uncle, achieve a dignity and a sense of identity, which although it may be inarticulate, is nonetheless profound. Neil stands at his uncle's grave thinking

> By comparison with the numberless millions with whom the earth had teemed, Uncle Matt could count himself blessed... If he had ever endured great spiritual anguish it had left no visible mark on him. He had never cheated anyone and had never harmed a living creature.\(^{47}\)

> As the minister comments during the funeral service, "He has fulfilled the highest destiny of man."\(^{48}\)

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\(^{46}\) *Music at the Close*, p. 72.


An awareness that the main characters are treated ironically opens up a new dimension; it makes it possible to see that McCourt is making less a study of faith than a study of romanticism very much like that Conrad was making in Lord Jim. What Daiches says about Lord Jim can be applied in varying degrees to the first three of McCourt’s novels.

Youth can and should be immature, can and should have illusions, can and should see disaster as adventure and mishap as opportunity; that is the whole point of Conrad’s story Youth, which is an impressive evocation of this state of mind in a most persuasively realized context. There is something engaging and even admirable about the illusions of youth; but they become dangerous if they persist after experience, when they foster self-delusion and that special kind of romanticism that Conrad probes so cunningly in Lord Jim.50

This, perhaps, makes it clear why a character like Neil Fraser returns to read Youth again and again but dislikes Lord Jim and finds it incomprehensible. Consequently at the end of each of the first three novels the reader is left feeling varying degrees of ambivalence toward the main characters.

In the fourth novel, Walk Through the Valley, there is no ironic treatment of the main character, Michael, for “Youth can and should have illusions.” At the end, therefore, when Michael achieves the fulfillment of his illusions through a Wordsworthian vision, there is no tinge of irony except perhaps that which comes from the setting, but even here there is less awareness of the indifference of the universe. And, too, the reader feels satisfied that Michael will not

49 McCourt’s latest short story “Medicine Woman” descends into pure character irony in that the main character is obviously mentally defective, yet she achieves more depth in life than the supposedly normal people in the story.

50 Daiches, p. 31 (rev. ed.).
carry that excessive imagination, that hyper ability to dream, into adult life where it will be "dangerous."

In the fifth novel, Fasting Friar, Walter Ackroyd's plight is often seen by minor character observers in terms of comic irony. Even McCourt's technique of objectifying him by using his last name so often makes the reader objectify him rather than sympathize with him. Many people in the novel think of him as being naive and a figure of fun and he actually is; his reluctant wooing and winning of another man's wife at times makes for situations of pure comedy. But in his own view he is wrestling with a major crisis in his life and he always takes himself seriously.

Thus at times McCourt's characters are seen not only as heroes but also as pawns. In terms of the immediate they are heroes triumphing over their own particular difficulty in life, but in the long run they seem very much like pawns of fate as well as the victims of their own romantic natures. What is more ultimately ironic than a character like Neil Fraser having a "flash of illumination" which reveals to him that he is dying for the good of mankind, "a hero . . . a god," when also in this same flash he sees that the previous vision he had had of the future "was false, like every dream he had ever had."52

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51 Characters in the novel call him "Walter" but McCourt always refers to him as "Ackroyd." In the majority of the chapters "Ackroyd" is the first word.

52 Music at the Close, p. 226. (Underline mine.)
CHAPTER IV

PLOT: QUESTS AND TRAPS

The keys to understanding the plot patterns of McCourt’s novels are his theory about the "two truths" of life, and his theme of faith as the integrating force between the two. McCourt’s theory dictates the contents of his plots. Theme directs their movement.

In keeping with his theory, which is based on man’s general rather than his particular condition, McCourt emphasizes the more universal aspects of life such as death, birth, love, honour, and sacrifice rather than superficial and transitory social predicaments. Even when he does include such an event, for example, the 1929 stock market crash in Music at the Close, it is seen less as a particular sociological occurrence of the time than as a small manifestation of the larger aspects of the human situation. While the larger social concerns are singularly lacking in McCourt’s plots, his method for working out his theory and theme in terms of the lives of ordinary people leading relatively uneventful and mundane lives leads him to emphasize minor everyday social events and interests such as baseball games, dances, child-rearing, housekeeping, social get-togethers, and faculty meetings.

Because of the theme of acquiring a faith in order to integrate the "two truths", the novels have a discernible three step development: first, the long movement towards isolation because of a lack of faith;
then the moment of illumination, or vision in which the character acquires a faith; and finally, the movement towards commitment and integration. \(^1\) In the first four novels the longest phase is the movement toward isolation, the vision and integration coming only at the end, and in the case of *Music at the Close* coming right at the point of the main character’s death. With the second, third, and fourth novels integration has just begun as they end. On the other hand, *Fasting Friar*, the fifth novel, mainly is concerned with integration, isolation having taken place before the story begins. However, the three steps in plot development are still there, integration remaining largely frustrated until the moment of vision which occurs late in the novel. Thus at all times McCourt’s plots are thematically directed to the point where they become formulaic.

The "ironic corollary" of the theme is evident in the plots mainly in two ways; first, by the strong use of coincidence in the Hardian manner, and secondly, by the development of a trap motif in some of the works.

By exploring McCourt’s plots through the three phases of isolation, vision, and integration, first in terms of the theme, and then in terms

\(^1\) In all the novels, except *The Wooden Sword*, the movement of the action is chronologically forward with only brief flashbacks. *The Wooden Sword*, however, is more tightly structured, having actually three time periods intermingling; the main focus is Steven as he moves rapidly toward his crisis of isolation; the other time period, which is seen only in fragments, is the time Steven spent in Africa during the war, the time he cannot bring himself to face; the third time period, seen through Steven’s autobiographical anecdotal writing, is the time of his childhood. Consequently, *The Wooden Sword* is structurally the most complex of McCourt’s novels. What holds the three time periods together is often a recurring line of poetry or prose which acts as a stream of consciousness connective.
of the "ironic corollary," it will be possible to observe, as we did with character, a certain tension and ambivalence which produce quite divergent effects.

In McCourt's novels the great universal forces of isolation are separation and death, both of which play a major part in the movement of the plots for they either initiate action, bring it to a climax, or conclude it. The plots of the first four novels, which we have noted are primarily concerned with the process of isolation, contain quite a number of separations and deaths, although in a decreasing ratio as one progresses through them: Music at the Close has the most and Walk Through the Valley the least, actually only one. Fasting Friar, the novel primarily of integration, has no deaths in the plot itself, the earlier deaths of the main character's parents being seen in the flashbacks, which expose the earlier descent into isolation.

Music at the Close is pervaded by separations and deaths. The novel begins and ends with them. At the beginning, Neil Fraser arrives as a young boy on the prairies separated from his familiar childhood environment in Ontario because of the death of his second parent, and at the end he dies alone on a strange beach in a strange country. The novel is divided into four books with a death as the climax of each. In Book One, "Summer Sun", the climax is the death of Charlie Steele, Neil's hero and the man who nurtured Neil's romantic inclinations by giving him books to read. And as Neil finds Charlie on the fly-infested river bank just before he commits suicide, Charlie talks to him about death and quotes Neil a phrase that was to haunt him throughout his life:

Death should come quietly — with dignity. There's something
in Shakespeare that keeps coming back to me — something about the setting sun and music at the close . . . . That's how I always thought it would be.²

Then later, after Neil watches as Charlie's body is carried away, he fails in a Marlowe-like attempt to tell Charlie's girl friend "a last message . . . that would bring comfort to the woman who had loved him."² However, the reality is too much and he rides away, his boyhood over.

In Book Two, "She Walks in Beauty,"⁵ the climax is the death of Neil's uncle. This event brings to an end Neil's brief university career since he, not reluctantly, has to return to the farm to look after it. Shortly after, his aunt dies too and Neil sees himself as totally alone. It was "the severing of the last human relationship that for Neil had any genuine affection."⁶ His isolation is complete.

Book Three concerns Neil's wanderings during the depression years, the "Years of the Locust," and in it the climax is the death of Neil's boyhood friend shortly after Neil has discovered him again after many years of separation. But the reunion is short-lived for Gil is killed leading the strikers in a small Saskatchewan coal town and Neil is

² Music at the Close, p. 63.
³ Ibid., p. 66.
⁴ The expression "Summer Sun," the title of Book One, is particularly appropriate in that it is from Poe's poem "Tamerlane": "And boyhood is a summer sun Whose waning is the dreariest one —"
⁵ This title is from Byron's poem of the same name. It indicates Neil's adolescent romanticizing when he falls idealistically in love, a type of love not wanted by the girl, Moira: "A woman likes to be put on a pedestal. But she doesn't want to stay there." (Music at the Close, p. 172).
⁶ Music at the Close, p. 137.
thrown into further depression:

Life so far had been a series of seemingly unrelated episodes and nothing more . . . People like Charlie Steele . . . once the idols of his boyish daydreams . . . . in retrospect had shrunk to the limits of ordinary flesh and blood . . . . (and) Gil Reardon who, like Charlie Steele, had once symbolized that which lay beyond the limits of the commonplace reality, was now like Charlie Steele, a broken lump of clay . . . had died for a fantastic ideal, a meaningless cliche — the freedom of mankind.7

Yet even so, Neil envied Gil because "Gil had a faith."

Book Four, appropriately called "Music at the Close," is concluded, as we mentioned, with Neil's own death, although for most readers this is more likely the climax than Neil's moment of vision.

Finally, Music at the Close begins during World War I and ends during World War II, and in both cases there is an atmosphere of death created as Neil hears at the beginning of adults who won't be coming back and at the end, before he too joins them, of his friends who won't return either.

Home is the Stranger has fewer separations and deaths in it which affect the plot, but those which do occur change the movement dramatically. It too begins with death and separation and the ending is prevented only by a coincidence from also being one of death. At the beginning the death of Norah's aunt and uncle in a bombing raid on their Scottish city sends her into isolation and except for the Canadian airmen with whom she has fallen in love she is alone. Then almost immediately she emigrates from the more familiar and romantic scene of her childhood to the prairies with her new husband. Even here she is

7 Music at the Close, pp. 167-168.
haunted by the symbols of death. She visits an old house which had formerly belonged to a pioneering couple with a large family but which is now abandoned and in a state of decay. She also has a frightening experience with an escaped mental patient (one who is symbolically dead to society) which leaves her shaken and emphasizes to her once again her failure to meet a situation. Later, during a severe winter, Jim must leave her to go to his dying father in Vancouver and this separation and death builds the climax of the novel. Alone, Norah cannot cope with her isolation, made all the more absolute by a raging storm which cuts off power and help. Her son, Phillip, develops pneumonia and in spite of a mercy flight to the nearest hospital he dies on the way. This tragedy causes her complete mental collapse and before long she wanders out on the prairie believing her death a necessity: "Now was the appropriate hour of her going, the hour fixed from the beginning of time." But it is during the time she is out on the prairie that her vision occurs and she regains her will to live.

In *The Wooden Sword* death and separation are important in each of the chronological segments. The deaths of Steven's parents and uncle and a body he saw floating in the river made a great impression on him as a child. Then, the deaths that occur all around him in Africa as he fights in World War II arouse in him at first a horror and then because he is afraid, a feeling of failure:

Kenton died without a sound. Other men died violently, struggling with spasmodic frenzy to hold the escaping spirit within the shattered framework of the body, summon it back . . . . Only with sunrise did the last bubbling

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8 *Home is the Stranger*, p. 254.
shriek die away into enduring silence.

How long since the attack? He didn't know; it didn't matter. How long since he had crouched behind the frail barricade of stone, body immobilized, nerves active, frenzied, so that at one time he had screamed . . . . They didn't know, the men huddled in the ungainly attitudes of exhausted life, what he had done . . . . (but) the dead knew that he had thrown away his sword.9

When he is in rest camp he is once again involved with death, this time the death of a young native girl, Helen, whom he had idealized as a modern connection with the Ancient Greeks and whom he had loved. He again feels that he was a coward because he did not go back to save her in a run for the boats while under fire. This is the episode that he has rejected, blocked out of his consciousness, which blights his life during the present time of the novel. Thus death is at the basis of the internal conflict throughout the novel. Even in the present there is death though. Old Dr. Fotheringham, the man who understood Steven's search for faith, dies, and Steven envies him and despairs of his own existence:

Dr. Fotheringham had lived and shaped his life in a day before the cracks in the foundation were too evident to be ignored; in the day when life still held a purpose . . . . now you doubted from the beginning.10

In Walk Through the Valley, the main character, Michael, is seen in much more detail as a child, the novel ending when he is only fourteen. He is able to find some outlet for his romantic imagination in his father's connection with whisky runners, but eventually reality

9 The Wooden Sword, pp. 231, 233.

10 Ibid., p. 209. Steven here echoes Neil's statement about the same situation (see Chapter II, Footnote 14).
shatters his childhood world when this same connection results in his father's death. Michael's conversation with his sister, Sheila, about her lover, Blaze, who had escaped the police trap, shows that he is in danger of growing into the type of adult the rest of McCourt's main characters become, unable to have faith but desperately seeking something to live by:

"He'll come back," she said, her eyes as barren and desolate as the fields they looked across. "I know he'll come back."

That was all — the one vehement affirmation of the faith by which she lived. Or pretended to. For Blaze would not come back. So much Michael knew for certain in this strange new world of bewildering terrible uncertainties. And knowing, suspected that Sheila must know too, Blaze was like his name — a sudden brief upflaming of something bright and dangerous and infinitely alluring. But the flame had gone out, extinguished as if it had never been. 11

Fortunately, Michael has his "flash of illumination" shortly after this and it equips him for living with life as it is.

Although isolation is seen in Fasting Friar only in flashbacks, it too was caused largely by death. Walter Ackroyd's father had been a small-town minister who "was always looking for something he couldn't find," and who tried to live through his son, "You're young, Walter, you're young -- and you have no ties. You can go far -- far. Don't be swayed, son, don't be swayed." 12 Consequently, when the father dies without seeing "his dreams fulfilled by his son," Walter feels that he has "a charge . . . to keep," 13 and thus this death too has a dramatic effect on the life of the main character.

11 Walk Through the Valley, p. 214.
12 Fasting Friar, p. 85.
13 Ibid.
The second phase in each novel is the "flash of illumination," the vision which, in each case, comes at a practically definable moment. All characters have reached the farthest point in their isolation, Norah and Steven actually considering suicide. Even Neil's enlistment in the army can be seen as a subconscious death wish, his life seemingly at an impasse. Secondly, with the exception of Ackroyd, all are alone, physically alone. Neil is alone on the beach in Normandy; Norah is alone on the prairie; Steven is sitting alone in his living room; and Michael is alone looking out across the valley. Ackroyd is at least alone with his thoughts, as Marion is asleep beside him. All of them feel a definite sense of strangeness as the experience comes over them.

Neil finds it

Strange how little they (his friends, Charlie Steele and Gil) mattered now . . . Strange that in the last hour of his life he could be so completely free from fear. Strange, too, that there should be no bitterness. Strangest of all, that he could think more clearly, see more clearly than in life."^14

Norah's vision "had no relation to anything having previous existence in her consciousness."^15 Steven's thoughts undergo "some queer process beyond imagining."^16 Michael discovers that the "thoughts in his brain ceased altogether."^17 Even Walter Ackroyd feels a "strange recklessness."^18 Actually what each of these characters experiences is beyond words; it is an

15 Home is the Stranger, p. 256.
16 The Wooden Sword, p. 222.
17 Walk Through the Valley, p. 221.
18 Fasting Friar, p. 162.
experience that reaches the level of the sublime. Michael's flash of illumination is not an internal realization as with the others but an external vision of the pure romantic variety:

A rush of tears came to Michael's eyes and blinded him. When he could see again, the buck was gone. He saw only the valley and the bare hilltop and the far grey sky. But they were not the same. He knew dimly they would never be the same again. For he had seen them in the light of something glimpsed for a moment only, and remembered always.19

Apparently, the closest McCourt can come in describing this mystical experience is the word "something." 20

The third phase is integration, and in this phase love, which is often accompanied by a sense of sacrifice, plays an important part. While love, including sex, enters into the novels prior to this time, it is always frustrated and unsatisfactory. In fact, in the first

19 Walk Through the Valley, p. 221.

20 A. O. Lovejoy in The Great Chain of Being states that the use of such a word or words similar to it can indicate a great deal about a writer. He describes qualities of mind that such writers have, three qualities that are the essence of the romantic mind; The first he terms "Metaphysical pathos ... any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which like the words of a poem, awaken through their associations ... a congenial mood or tone of feeling on the part of the philosopher or his readers ... . There is, in the first place, the pathos of sheer obscurity, the loveliness of the incomprehensible ... . The reader does not know exactly what they mean, (obscure phrases and words) but they have all the more on that account an air of sublimity; an agreeable feeling at once of awe and exaltation comes over him as he contemplates thoughts of so immeasurable a profundity." The second he terms "the pathos of the esoteric ... . the human craving for ... a consecutive progress of thought guided (not) by the ordinary logic available to every man, but through a sudden leap whereby one rises to a plane of insight wholly different in its principle from the level of more understanding." The third is "eternalistic pathos — the aesthetic pleasure which the bare abstract idea of immutability gives us." All three of these qualities underlie McCourt's thinking. (A. O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being [New York, 1936], pp. 11-12.)
three novels the marriage of each of the main characters is a failure. Neil and Steven eventually find themselves so impotent that they cannot even bring themselves to act when they discover their wives may be having affairs. Norah, too, has a highly unsatisfactory experience in adultery. Yet once they have experienced the vision, the characters are able to commit themselves to their mates. Neil commits himself to his wife and son believing that his death will somehow transform him into "a hero, a god" in their eyes. Steven finally faces his nightmare cloud for his wife's sake to free her but comes through the experience unwilling to give her up and able to "fight for her love." Norah commits herself to her husband: "There was, after all, something worth living for — Jim's love. To lose his love, which had survived thus far in spite of it all, would be the ultimate, the only defeat." Even Michael is able to respond to people after his vision:

He spoke with a warm, intense feeling. Not just because the day had been fine, really, but because his mother was waiting for him when he came home . . . . The look of joy in his mother's eyes disturbed him strangely.

Since Fasting Friar is primarily a novel of integration, it is Ackroyd's developing love affair with Marion that is really at the heart of the plot in spite of the fight he wages for academic freedom in the Univer-

21 Both Neil and Steven are not indifferent to their situations but actually condone their wives' suspected adultery, believing, in their state of mind, that they have no right to react against it.

22 Music at the Close, p. 226.

23 The Wooden Sword, p. 254.

24 Home is the Stranger, p. 268.

25 Walk Through the Valley, p. 222.
ity, for it is not possible for him to win the fight until he achieves his moment of vision in sexual communion with Marion.\textsuperscript{26} Only after he commits himself to her can he come sufficiently out of his shell to fight and win the academic battle.

In conclusion, the characters can be seen moving through a three-stage journey in fulfillment of McCourt's theory and theme, a fact which further emphasizes the allegorical aspects of his novels. His characters are like Christian in\textit{Pilgrim's Progress} whose journey is to the City of God, only for these characters the journey is toward a faith which they must find in order to be "born again." They also meet the "Giant Despair" and many of the other characters that Christian meets, and they also come to places like the "Slough of Despond." The essential difference is, however, that McCourt's characters are journeying not toward God, but toward life. The parallel may be even further expanded, for McCourt's characters, who are often aware of a fate and destiny which can at any time trap them, are like Christian, who always finds doors that lead directly down to hell throughout his journey. These traps, insofar as the plot is concerned, are emphasized through frequent interference of unfortunate coincidences.

In\textit{Music at the Close} a number of coincidences adversely affect the main character. Neil's uncle dies shortly after he gets to university and he has to leave; Neil invests heavily in the stock market just before it crashes and loses most of what he has worked for; he meets

\textsuperscript{26} This same concept of the mystical powers of sexual communion is also hinted at in\textit{Music at the Close}: "Then she was in his (Neil's) arms, and as he held her close, he caught the delicate scent of some strange, (sic) perfume . . . 'Listen', he said . . . 'Music. A long way off, faint and mysterious. The way it should be.'" (p. 182).
Gil again by accident only to see him killed; and finally, just as he reaches his lowest ebb, war breaks out, giving him a chance to escape from his drab life:

They had gone to war because there was nothing else for them to do . . . . For Neil himself it had offered a way of escape from the difficulties that had been threatening to destroy him.  

Ironically his "escape" ends in his own death.

In Home is the Stranger there are so many coincidental meetings between people walking on the prairies that one almost thinks of Hardy's Wessex. The most important coincidence in the novel is the severe storm which occurs just after Norah's husband has left her alone to go to his dying father. It is this storm that is largely responsible for the death of her son and her own mental collapse. However, it must also be mentioned that Norah's rescue at the end is a coincidence in that all her wanderings over the prairie only led her back to the path her husband would follow on the way home.

It is a major and unfortunate coincidence in The Wooden Sword that Helen, the Greek girl Steven meets and loves, should be the one native chosen to lead the group on a raid into enemy territory, for as has been mentioned, this leads to her death and Steven's collapse.

The major accident or coincidence in Walk Through the Valley is the death of Michael's father. Either the policeman or Dermott could

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27 Music at the Close, p. 224.

28 This whole novel has a Hardian sense of coincidence and fate about it which gives it a most unprairie-like effect for those who are familiar with the prairies. People simply do not meet so coincidentally in all that vastness. You can see one another coming for miles.
have been killed as they struggled on the ground with the gun, but it was Michael's father.

_Fasting Friar_ contains no major coincidences, which is to be expected since they occur mainly in the isolation phases of the novels and _Fasting Friar_ is, as has been noted, mainly a novel of integration.

Clearly then McCourt's characters are more than just victims of bad luck; the number of important coincidences is an indication of something more. Norah identifies what it is:

She seemed now to see in the shape of things a deliberate-ness of intention actuated by malice and directed against herself and all men living in the vast vacuity of the prairies. It was as if the indifferent forces of nature were not indifferent at all; they were fighting back against man's intrusion into a region where he was an interloper . . . . Coincidences, if they were many, ceased to be coincidences; they became a system.29

The other characters too, often feel themselves trapped. In _Music at the Close_ the trap motif is strong, McCourt himself adding authorial comments on it. As a young boy Neil sees that the flies buzzing "like him were prisoners;"30 later he runs away from an incident with his teacher and comes to feel that "What he had done he had done because he was trapped;"31 he comes to feel that his friends Charlie Steele and Gil were also "trapped by their own passions and the forces of society . . . . destroyed utterly . . . . no more important than a transient snowflake on the window-pane."32 Even the policemen who try to stop the strikers

29 _Home is the Stranger_, p. 187.
30 _Music at the Close_, p. 21.
31 Ibid., p. 24.
32 Ibid., p. 167.
are trapped: "between the miner and the policeman there was no difference; both were caught in the same trap."

Finally, he sees himself as trapped as he moves toward his own death: "for a moment he felt a desperate urge to strike out wildly against the forces that were herding him toward extinction." Steven Venner eventually is trapped into finally having to face his "cloud" and Ackroyd is trapped by his colleagues into having to make a commitment. Actually what these characters are trapped by on the surface is their isolation which leads to paralysis of will, but while McCourt shows them overcoming this through their visions, they still can be seen as "trapped" in their own personalities of which the romantic visionary is a part. Neil's vision at the end of the novel may, he feels, lift him out of the trap, but for the reader the climax of the novel may be not his vision but his death, and that he goes to it willingly, gladly, can be seen as the most depressing of ironies.

33 Music at the Close, p. 165.

34 Ibid., p. 224.
CHAPTER V

SETTING: LAND OF DREAMS AND DARKLING PLAIN

The prairie setting of McCourt's novels is important not because it has value as landscape realism, but because it has symbolic value as thematic counterpoint. It is, for him, as we mentioned in Chapter Two, a locale that is "in this age of bewilderment . . . completely in harmony with the spirit of man," a place which creates a mood "in keeping with the more thinking among mankind." McCourt here is commenting on Hardy's view of Egdon Heath and Hardy's belief that "human souls may find themselves in closer and closer harmony with external things wearing a somberness distasteful to our race when it was young." McCourt believes that this is the harmony the prairies invoke. He recalls Rupert Brooke's assessment of the American West, an assessment which suggests that "orthodox beauty . . . has approached its last quarter. The new Vale of Tempe may be a gaunt waste in Thule." The feeling of newness troubled him; America, particularly Western America, was not to him the artist's domain. "The maple and the beech conceal no Dryads and Pan has never been heard among these reed beds. Look as long as you like upon a cataract of the New World, you shall not see a white arm in the foam. A godless place. And the dead do not return. The land is virginal, the wind cleaner than elsewhere, and every day the first day . . . .

1 The Canadian West in Fiction, pp. 122-123. (See Chapter II, Footnote 33).
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.

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This is the essence of the gray freshness and brisk melancholy of this land. The old concept of beauty cannot be applied; the new concept is stark and bleak, but a type of beauty nonetheless. Another prairie writer, William Butler, who has been an obvious influence on McCourt and about whom McCourt has just recently published the major work, Remember Butler, also saw something of this "new beauty" in the land. McCourt concludes his chapter on Saskatchewan in The Road Across Canada with a paragraph from Butler's The Lone Land:

The great ocean itself does not present more infinite variety than does this prairie-ocean of which we speak.... No ocean of water in the world can vie with its gorgeous sunsets; no solitude can equal the loneliness of a night-shadowed prairie; one feels the stillness and hears the silence, the wail of the prowling wolf makes the voice of solitude audible, the stars look down through infinite silence on a silence almost as intense.... But for my part, the prairies had nothing terrible in their aspect, nothing oppressive in their loneliness. One saw here the world as it had taken shape and form from the hands of the Creator.

McCourt also sees this same virginal yet sombre beauty in the prairies and feels in harmony with his environment; as he says in The Road Across Canada, he "feel(s) at home in the middle of vast empty spaces," and "irrationally love(s) almost everything about Saskatchewan" — for him it is "the new Vale of Tempe," but, as such, more a symbolic harmony with a state of mind than actually a geographical place.

McCourt uses the prairies as a laboratory, a testing ground for his

4 The Canadian West in Fiction, p. 116.
5 The Road Across Canada, p. 155.
6 Ibid., p. 147.
7 Ibid., p. 141.
theme. He says that "Saskatchewan is a land in which modern man finds it hard to live with and by himself," yet this is precisely what modern man must do: live with and by himself, since all the old faiths, spiritual comforts, have vanished. On the prairie all the social facades and remaining shibboleths are stripped away and man becomes alone with the universe. Man must find a faith by and in himself. That he is able to do so is a testimony to his power to dream and a tribute to his spirit, which presumably is in harmony with its environment.

Yet if the prairies are important in counterpointing McCourt's theme, they are also significant in counterpointing the "ironic corollary" of his theme, perhaps even more so since the emptiness forces man to find a faith or perish spiritually. For if ever there was a need for a faith it is on the prairies where the vast indifference and even sinisterness and malignity of the universe cannot be avoided, and in spite of the fact that McCourt says, as we mentioned, in The Road Across Canada, that he "irrationally loves almost everything about the prairies," his fiction contains some of the most devastating description of the prairies that has ever been written. It changes from a land of sombre dreams to a darkling plain.

The tension and ambivalence created by these two seemingly contradictory aspects of the prairie, that is, its sombre beauty and its

8 The Road Across Canada, p. 137.

9 Sinclair Ross in his novel, As For Me and My House (Toronto, 1941), writes his descriptions with the bleakness of realism but his characters, lacking the imagination of McCourt's, simply do not reach the heights or the depths inspired in McCourt's characters by their environment.
malignity, are seen in the characters' attitudes.

For McCourt's five main characters, even the three presumably born there, the prairie is a frightening place, a land "without a book, or a picture, or a symphony. Or a faith." And because they all lack a faith themselves they turn from it in fear. Neil flees from the window his first night in his new prairie home "appalled by the immensity of the darkness." To Norah the prairie is "a part of some remote age before the sixth day, life swarmed," "a region from which the hand of God had been withdrawn before the act of creation was complete." Even her unimaginative husband had felt as a child when he looked out the window "the terror of complete vacuity." Steven sees it as "a land without a memory," and he, like Neil, often feels a sense of fear when he looks from a window out across it. Michael's father calls it "a god forsaken part of the earth," and even Michael himself sees in his valley "dead trees and stagnant water . . . a place from whence all life it seemed had long since fled." Ackroyd is depressed and frightened by the prairie whose "sky was simply a void, an emptiness flecked in daytime by immaterial wisps of cloud, in night

10 Home is the Stranger, p. 159.
12 Home is the Stranger, p. 16.
13 Ibid., p. 32.
14 Ibid., p. 51.
15 The Wooden Sword, p. 17.
16 Walk Through the Valley, p. 62.
17 Ibid., p. 17.
by dots of light that intensified by their inadequacy the terror of 
complete vacuity." Often for each of them "imagination (is) not 
strong enough to triumph over the reality." 

In an attempt to escape from reality, the characters rely either 
on their memories of the "golden plain of the land of childhood dreams," or create a land of dreams in their imaginations. Neil remembers his 
Ontario childhood, "his beloved fields and streams and woods," and 
Norah remembers her hills of Innishcoolin, "hills that had always been 
around her . . . close and companionable." Steven has nurtured dreams 
of a Lawrence of Arabia desert and Michael has been fed the romance of 
Ireland by his father. Ackroyd dreams of being a "fasting friar" aloof 
from life, a dream which he has been able actually to live for some time 
before realizing that it was the wrong dream because it was false to his 
essential nature. At times the prairie itself tantalizes them by trans­ 
forming itself into a land of dreams as in spring. But it is trans­ 
itory and gone before it can be accepted as part of reality; it is "an 
ilusion, a romantic dream rather than a season." However, none of 
them can sustain their land of dreams, at least their type of romantic 
dreams, in the face of reality; for they are romantic escapist dreams 
not the sombre dreams, the only type which the environment can sustain.

18 Fasting Friar, p. 11.
19 Music at the Close, p. 13.
20 The Wooden Sword, p. 72.
21 Music at the Close, p. 28.
22 Home is the Stranger, p. 3.
23 Fasting Friar, p. 131.
Yet dreams are necessary for a faith and presumably when the faith is acquired one would find the characters in harmony with their environment, but here the unexpected happens, for while their states of mind harmonize with the setting, their faiths do not, and the setting becomes a dissonance. For the faiths they achieve are all man-centered faiths, faith in man's spirit to prevail, not in harmony with the environment, but mainly in spite of it. Neil's faith is in man's progress, Norah's in her ability to fight the forces that would destroy her, Steven's in his ability to fight, Michael's in his ability to face whatever life offered, and Ackroyd's in a principle.

Neil is the only character who, like McCourt, ever feels at home and comfortable in the middle of vast empty spaces, and this comes about not because he found an environment-centered faith but because he loved solitude. He still, however, resented his environment because he was "chained to the farm." Michael has reality transformed for him in the form of a "Vale of Tempe" picture of the stag standing eternal and immutable, a picture which presumably the "gaunt waste of Thule" cannot produce. Norah still sees the earth as "the enemy of mankind," yet she is now "ready to make terms" with it. Ackroyd can "look at the plain and the night and the remote, indifferent stars and . . . feel at peace," but he still pulls down the blind. One imagines that because they all have acquired a faith they can live with their en-

24 *Music at the Close*, p. 194.
25 *Home is the Stranger*, p. 261.
27 *Fasting Friar*, p. 221.
vironment. But living with it and loving it are two different things.

The main way, however, in which the setting does counterpoint the theme is through the "ironic corollary." For in emphasizing the ultimate indifference or even malignancy of the universe, a faith in something man-centred becomes a necessity, whether it is an illusion or not. But there is a point at which stress on the insignificance of man creates the dominant impression, and man, faith and all, is reduced to irony.

Emphasis on the setting in McCourt's novels often turns it into the dominant "character" in much the same way as Hardy's Wessex became the main "character" in his novels. As a character, the prairie emerges as the antagonist, the antagonist against whom there is no defense. Man becomes insignificant in its immensity:

The land lay naked beneath the hot sun. Its surface, bare of native tree or shrub, unbroken by an irregularity of contour to distract the eye of the casual observer, stretched into distances so remote as to fade gradually beyond the range of sight. But there was variety in the wide bands of colour which fell in a simply wrought pattern across the flatness of the land. . . . The sky which arched over the land in a dome of unrecognizable depth and amplitude escaped monotony less through contrast than the almost imperceptible shadings into one another of infinite variations of one basic colour . . . . Between cloud and earth a grey veil slanted, a warp without a woof, streaks of light and darkness alternating over the dimly perceived background of blue which was the sky itself.

On the surface of the land, however much its undisturbed immensity might seem a part of some remote age before the sixth day, life swarmed. It clustered around little groups of farm buildings . . . . From these groups of buildings huddled behind wind-breaks of poplar or carragana — their only guard against the wind which blew everlastingly upon them from across a thousand miles of plain — life spread out in tenuous threads to the great fields beyond.

28 Fasting Friar, pp. 131-132.
Or worse, man becomes an intrusion, a blot upon the face of a land that was still in the sixth day of creation, and often the prairie seems to fight back against these "tenuous threads" of life unraveling across it, or against the little islands of civilization, the cities, "besieged by the sinister powers of which the prairie was the visible expression."  

Norah says that

> It was as if the indifferent forces of nature were not indifferent at all; they were fighting back against man's intrusion into a region where he was an interloper; they had resisted him stubbornly from the time of his in-coming . . . . they had mustered their strength and directed it towards . . . destruction.  

Even the specific topographical features and the various natural phenomena of the prairie are seen as manifestations of the sinisterness with which the characters must live. Rivers are never brooks or vast bodies of water sweeping to the sea, but "turgid stream(s) . . . (which) even in the light of the afternoon sun . . . (have) a curiously sinister quality."  

A lake becomes a picture of a wasteland that T. S. Eliot might have described:

> The lake lay in a shallow valley between low rounded hills. The beach where the gravel road came to an end was almost deserted. It looked depressing even in the bright morning sunlight — a narrow strip of gray sand washed by gray-green water . . . . It was incredible to Ackroyd that people could find pleasure living in such pathetic makeshifts set on the shores of a dead sea that had no history, no associations to give it life . . . . The landscape was all wrong for a fine spring morning. It was lonely, infinitely sad, and the few evidences of life were symbolic of man's pathetic search for joy in a world where no joy dwelt. Man corrupted whatever he touched. Without the evidence of his presence

29 Fasting Friar, p. 11.

30 Home is the Stranger, p. 187.

31 Music at the Close, p. 5.
— the shabby cottages . . . the scene might have been
invested with a sombre grandeur making it tolerable to
the eye, and endurable to certain moods.32

The wind becomes a "malevolent force,"33 "alive and full of hate."34

Hailstorms are "an appalling phenomenon, an awful manifestation of
destructive malice that awakened latent instincts, ancient fears . . .
(it) impelled belief in those dark powers which reason, in daylight
denied."35 An early frost is another example of the malevolence of
nature which can break a man: "Uncle Matt no longer believed in next
year."36 Snow and cold have their sinister purpose too:

The snow drove in from across the invisible waste in nearly
horizontal lines, piling against fences, buildings, hedges,
all obstacles that stood in its pathway, in great rounded
dunes up which the new-fallen flakes whirled in spirals to
form leaping crests, forked white flames . . .

Across the level places where there was nothing to
stop it, over a hard-packed surface of its own creating,
the snow ran in snake-like convolutions, alive but without
sentience, aimless and headlong in its wild flurrying before
the wind, wind which because its strength seemed to vary
minute by minute, was one more inconstant element in a
world where order and control had ceased utterly to be
. . . . A host of pipers played on a thousand pipes the
music of the dance, each pipe shrill and discordant in it-
self, yet blending magically with its fellows into a sus-
tained and awful harmony, a demoniac orchestra called from
hell to pipe the music of the whirlwind.37

32 Fasting Friar, pp. 131-132.
33 Ibid., p. 161.
34 Home is the Stranger, p. 188.
35 Fasting Friar, p. 163. This same comment about the power of
darkness is made by McCourt in The Road Across Canada. He says that "at
night . . . the loneliness closes in and earth and sky assume a detach-
ment and an immensity that compel an awareness of worlds not realized
in the light of common day." (p. 137).
36 Music at the Close, p. 33.
37 Home is the Stranger, p. 178.
This character, the prairie, is never transformed as the human characters are in McCourt's novels. It remains inviolate. The darkling plain does not become a land of dreams. Yet it is the land in which the characters must live on their journey toward faith and it turns out to be much more difficult terrain to traverse than ever Christian faced in Pilgrim's Progress; for these characters are confined almost wholly to the Slough of Despond on their journey. McCourt apparently sees this as the way modern man must go: "All prairie streams... (are) slow-moving and turgid — no River of Life shown to the Evangelist, clear as crystal, babbling over rocks; but to the traveller weary of the plains the stream and the lakes and the valley are an authentic revelation." 38 So with his characters, weary of the plain, of living with emptiness and vacuity, without faith, any change, such as a stream, no matter how small, how insignificant, how turgid, becomes a revelation, like a faith; it may not be much, but it's all they have. On the other hand, when the sixth character of McCourt's novels, the prairie, does dominate, it overwhelms the other five: it is "as if there's nothing between you and all the evil in the universe." 39

The unresolved ambivalence on McCourt's part concerning the setting is found even in his non-fiction work, The Road Across Canada. He states, for example, in the chapter on Saskatchewan, that man is making progress on the prairies: "The sense of depression is unjustified; the deserted farms are no symbols of the triumph of hostile nature over man. The land

38 The Road Across Canada, p. 142.
39 Fasting Friar, p. 133.
is rich and well cultivated;" Regina's artificial lake is "an always
muddy and sometimes ill-smelling triumph of the human spirit;" the
government is taking steps to clear out the algae that pollutes the
lakes. Yet, at the same time, he can say that the city of Regina
"and every other city . . . are alien eruptions on the face of nature,
they disturb the harmony of a world in which the steel-and-glass ant-
hills of modern man are an impertinence," that the wind blows with
"nerve-grating monotony," that it is "a region . . . vast, incongruous,
and incomprehensible," and that "Moose Jaw is a neon-bedecked oasis
in a valley of dry bones." Man, then, is both an "impertinence" on
the face of nature, and a creature whose spirit will "triumph" over it.
Apparently McCourt lives with this ambivalence as his characters do.

40 The Road Across Canada, p. 137.
41 Ibid., p. 147.
42 Ibid., p. 145.
43 Ibid., p. 147.
44 Ibid., p. 141.
46 Ibid., p. 149.
CONCLUSION

We have examined Edward McCourt's fiction through the shaping force of his theme and its "ironic corollary" and discovered that the implications go far beyond simple prairie realism. When the positive aspects of the theme are dominant, his fiction assumes allegorical characteristics; when the "ironic corollary" becomes dominant, a particular novel may read like a pessimistic study in determinism; and when a psychological point of view is emphasized, either in the approach to theme or "ironic corollary" or both, the work turns into a case history study of the isolated and alienated personality, one of the most pervasive of modern disorders. Since more than one or even all three of these tendencies often exist within a single novel, the tension and ambivalence created can produce quite different effects from novel to novel in spite of the fact that, as we mentioned in the introduction, there is no development in McCourt's work.

In terms of a positive statement of his theme and its application to the "two truths" about life, McCourt's fourth novel, Walk Through the Valley, is the most simple and straightforward, rising to the level

1 Reviewers of Walk Through the Valley, judging it in terms of realism, have missed its strong thematic shaping force and allegorical implications and faulted it for its "authorial intrusions . . . distortion of both plot and character," (Eliot Gose, Canadian Literature, 1 [Summer, 1959], 78-79) and because "McCourt cannot invent a plot . . . . an ending dramatically poor and morally shocking." (Saturday Night, 74 [March 14, 1959], 32). What the latter reviewer finds morally shocking he does not say. Gose, it may be recalled was mentioned earlier, also said in his review, "Anyone read The Bear recently?" suggesting that
of allegory. Young Michael's walk through the valley of the shadow of fear and death, which brings him eventually to heights where he will fear no evil, is a wholly sympathetic study of the romantic soul adapting itself to existence, or more likely adapting existence to itself. The imagery and symbolism used to describe Michael's quest give it a more generic than particular quality, and produce, therefore, strong allegorical overtones. In this novel the "ironic corollary" is barely in evidence: coincidences and the trap motif do not dominate or intrude in the plot, and the ultimate indifference or malignity of the universe, which is seen through the setting, is muted. Also, Michael's descent is less protracted and less profound than is that of the main characters in the other novels who all carry their descent long into adulthood. Thus Michael's vision, when it happens, seems a much more natural outcome than an escape, for "youth can and should have illusions," particularly romantic youth. The transformation of the stag into a symbol of mystical beauty, eternal and out of time, creates for Michael at the end of the novel a music at the close and for the reader, if not music, at least a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Home is the Stranger is the weakest novel in terms of the theme of faith since the emphasis of the "ironic corollary" overwhelms it. In this novel faith is needed not to withstand the ultimate indifference of the universe, but the malignity of it. Norah may achieve her faith at the end and seemingly be able to cope with life but the dark forces ranged against her make her faith seem small and fragile and ultimately he recognizes the thematic force of the novel but apparently he feels it is derivative.
insignificant. Although she herself is always treated sympathetically and never critically, the unfortunate series of coincidences "that became a system" in the plot, and the setting "the earth which was the enemy of mankind" create an antagonist which Norah simply cannot overcome. Up to the end of the novel all coincidences work against Norah and consequently when she is saved coincidentally from freezing to death (she had apparently walked in a circle before she collapsed so that her husband found her beside the path) the feeling is not so much that coincidences can be good as well as bad but that the malignant forces against her were merely playing with her, saving her for a more opportune time. The faith she achieves, faith in her ability to fight the plan of destiny and "defy the forces which sought to destroy her," cannot compete with "the existence of that malignant power which here, in the middle of this lonely desolation, found conditions more favourable to its nurturing." She ends up more resigned than defiant, "ready to make terms with the earth itself," and knowing "that whatever peace she was to find in life, she must find it here." Home is the stranger, but stranger yet is the home.

The Wooden Sword is the most psychologically oriented of the five novels and Steven Wenner is McCourt's most deeply analysed character. The psychoanalysis, coupled with frequent use of stream of consciousness technique, allows the reader to see how the romantic mind functions.

2 Home is the Stranger, p. 257.
3 Ibid., p. 261.
4 Ibid., p. 268.
5 Ibid.
The "vision" in this novel, seen in terms of Steven's plunging through a nightmare cloud obscuring some dark moment in his past, is more of a psychological than mystical event and consequently, for the modern reader, used to Freudian dream psychology, more "realistic." However, the irony in the novel is still evident, for the psychological attitude toward faith is that it is necessary, even if it is merely an illusion. The Wooden Sword illustrates Frierson's point that "Man is freed from illusions only to find he needs an illusion to live for." 6

Fasting Friar is the least successful of McCourt's novels since it juxtaposes an indifferent or even malignant setting against a plot which is essentially one of integration, often producing an incongruous effect. An indifferent or malignant universe is more effective when it is juxtaposed against a plot of isolation and alienation as it is in the first four novels. The intrusion of the malignant prairie setting is out of place with Ackroyd's agonizing indecision whether or not to join his colleagues in their fight for academic freedom. When Ackroyd, considering intellectual freedom, asks a colleague, "Is there no hope of winning?" and the colleague answers, "Not in our lifetime, Walter, not in a dozen lifetimes. But I like to feel that when the scales do tip the right way — a thousand — ten thousand — years from now . . ." 7, this discussion is reduced to irony, even absurdity, in the context of the deterministic setting. Also, Ackroyd himself is treated ambivalently by McCourt, as we noted in Chapter III, and the result is to introduce an element of satire. Ackroyd always sees himself with the

6 Frierson, p. 261

7 Fasting Friar, p. 179.

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seriousness of a Hamlet, but to the other characters, and to McCourt himself, he has some of the characteristics of a Walter Mitty. Consequently, when the "ironic corollary" of McCourt's theme is emphasized in a novel of integration it creates a mood not of profound pessimism but of light satire.

*Music at the Close* is the most complex of McCourt's novels and, as far as impact is concerned, the most successful. The balance between the theme and its "ironic corollary" in the treatment of character, plot, and setting (Neil is the only one of the characters who is not completely at odds with his environment) is so even that by the end of the novel the reader is reacting as he would to an optical illusion configuration; each time he blinks the whole picture changes. One picture is that Neil, by his death, has found meaning in life:

Because he died, and thousands and millions like him, man would not at once be unchained. But he and his fellows had made a contribution, however blindly, however unwillingly, to a struggle that might last a thousand years . . . . His death was the only justification for his having lived at all.8

The other picture, a picture that the reader has blinked into existence in other parts of the book, reduces Neil and man and his spirit to nothingness:

Darkness lay over the land, not transparent now but like a heavy shroud . . . . Then silence, absolute, unbroken.

And darkness that enveloped the universe.9

Thus the tension and ambivalence remain right up to the end, but since

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8 *Music at the Close*, p. 227.


10 In her review of the novel, Hilda Neatby illustrates this ambivalent reaction: she states that Neil is "finally rescued from futile-
it is the "ironic corollary" picture that is the last one, what should have been music at the close becomes sweet bells jangled out of tune. The result is, as we noted earlier, that the death of Neil can have for the reader some of the tragic impact of the death of King Lear.

In his more recent work, Remember Butler, McCourt has found in Sir William Butler a figure who in real life embodied many of the qualities of McCourt's own characters. Butler, however, in having lived a more positive and active life, comes close to being McCourt’s ideal character: one who embodies the "two truths" of life because he has a


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faith. In the "Preface" to Remember Butler McCourt writes:

This book was written in the hope of calling back to memory one who, whatever his faults and foibles, bore throughout his life an honourable and often heroic part in what he himself called 'the ever-recurring fight of day with darkness that gives to man's life on earth its nerving necessity, its ceasesless ideal, its sole nobility.'

Yet eventually even for this man the light failed and he reached that point Dr. Fotheringham referred to, "the last disillusionment."

The last years of Butler's life were busy, crowded years . . . But in spite of his capacity to retain old interests and assume new, his last years were shadowed by a melancholy at odds with his usual robust optimism. In part it was more than the natural accompaniment of old age — the shadow that gathers about life's close; . . . most of all from a weakening of faith in the value of life itself. The men he had known in youth . . . who were born, they believed, to achieve greatness and knew they would never die, epitomized for Butler in his darker hours the futility of human endeavours and the insignificance of all things mortal.

Unlike what he has been able to do for his fictional characters, that is, give them their music at the close, for Butler McCourt can only hope that he would have come to believe that his life had been worthwhile:

Looking back over the course of his own life, he could hardly feel that whether he had lived or died made no difference in the sum of things. He had hurt few men and helped many . . . and one would like to believe that at the end he held firmly to the truth of what he had written years before in words which constitute a moving affirmation of faith in the significance of each man's efforts.

There are many echoes in these statements from McCourt's fiction, many of the phrases actually being the same, particularly from the novel Music at the Close. McCourt concludes his biography of Butler with a


14 Remember Butler, p. 257. (Italics mine.)

15 Ibid., p. 258. (Italics mine.)
comment about his final resting place which gives him, too, his music at the close:

... there remained only the quiet fields under a quiet sky and near by the River Suir sliding past on its way to the sea and further off the grand upthrust of the Galtees and all around him the silence and solitude in which he had always been at home.  

But in spite of this music at the close which McCourt creates for Butler, "darkness" is present in the world and Butler did eventually succumb to it. Still, McCourt insists we must find a faith so that we can fight it; life becomes a race between disappearing faiths and encroaching despair. Thus faith is seen as the "sole nobility" of life, but it can also be seen as the ultimate irony.

Aside from McCourt's emphasis on acquiring and maintaining a faith, faith essentially in the Promethean spirit of man and his ability to prevail, his novels may be viewed, as we mentioned, as studies of a particularly modern problem, a modern social problem, that of individual isolation and alienation, which while it is more often seen in terms of an urban environment, is just as much a problem in a rural environ-

16 Remember Butler, p. 260.

17 Two novels which deal with this problem in an urban setting but which have at their centre a theory and theme parallel with McCourt's are Ethel Wilson's Swamp Angel (Toronto, 1954) and Saul Bellow's Seize the Day (New York, 1956). In Swamp Angel a conversation between the main character, who has tried to escape her problems by retreating to a semi-isolated lake, and her aging mentor, is strongly reminiscent of the conversation between Steven Venner and Dr. Fotheringham:

"I sit on top of my little mound of years," said Mrs. Severance, "and it is natural and reasonable that I should look back, and I look back and round and I see the miraculous interweaving of creation . . . the everlasting web . . . and I see a stone and a sword and this stub," and she threw down the stub of her cigarette, "and the man who made it, joined to the bounds of creation -- has creation any bounds, Maggie? -- and I see God everywhere.
McCourt believes that it may be more so, since, in a rural environment, the individual has lost any sense of belonging, even as a stranger; in a rural environment, an individual is absolutely alone. Therefore, in spite of the fact that McCourt believes that a novelist should not be a social propagandist, his novels are illuminating comments on a profound modern social problem.

And finally this brings us to McCourt's Canadianism, for the vast distances and adverse climate and terrain of much of Canada have made the sense of alienation and isolation more acute for Canadians than for

And Edward Vardoe (Alberto says he seems to be married or something — did you know?) and your little Chinese boy and the other little boy and you and me and who knows what. We are all in it together. 'No man is an island, I am involved in Mankind,' and we have no immunity and we may as well realize it. You won't be immune ever, at that lake, Maggie" (nor anywhere else, thought Maggie. No one is.) "I have just a few convictions left and I hope to die before I lose them. But when Albert says What do you believe and I say I believe in faith and Albert says Faith in what, I can't tell him: but faith in God is my support, and it makes old age bearable and happy, and fearless I think. Yet that is not why I believe." (pp. 150-151).

In these lines we have a theory and theme similar to McCourt's, the only difference being that the theme of faith is given a religious emphasis.

Bellow's main character is a romantic, much like McCourt's characters, who can find no outlet for his sensitivities in a society whose only value is money. He feels cut off from everyone, including his wife, who tells him to "stop acting like a youngster." (p. 121). He also, like McCourt's characters, compulsively quotes romantic poetry, "I fall upon the thorns of life." Yet he survives, not because his romanticism is destroyed, but because of his ability to have a vision: "all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid looking people burst out in . . . his breast." (p. 92). And it is this vision which permits him to go on.

It is no accident that the University Hospital in Saskatoon is a centre for psychiatric study, particularly of schizophrenia, a disorder caused, it is believed, by feelings of isolation and alienation.
the people of most other countries. A recent article by Patrick Anderson in *The Spectator* suggests the extent to which an adverse environment has shaped the Canadian character:

Refrigerated by Hudson Bay, which bites deep into its middle, its charm is further reduced by the Laurention or Pre-Cambrian shield, 'the oldest granite in the world,' which extends in a kind of obsessional melancholia over thousands of square miles of Labrador to places so distant and so cold that they desert geography to become images for extreme states of mind: The hero's death-wish, the paranoiac's frozen virginity . . . 'the land God gave to Cain.'

Yet if Anderson could come to this conclusion without even mentioning that third area of wasteland, the prairie, that "Guant waste of Thule," it is little wonder that Canadians gravitate toward cities strung out in a narrow band along the U.S. border. McCourt's closing comments in *The Road Across Canada* not only show that he knows something of the underlying forces that have shaped Canadians but also suggest that in them might lie the non-literary shaping force of his own theme:

But anyone driving the Trans-Canada Highway through Ontario . . . will understand that this continuous compulsion to go on painting the Laurentian Shield involves much more than mere imitation of a once-popular school. It is a measure of the extent to which we are still under the domination of a physical environment so vast, so overwhelming, that only in one or two crowded cities can we hope to escape its impact. Drive the Highway from coast to coast -- much of the distance through dense, silent, oppressive forest -- and you are aware, every mile you drive, that less than a day's journey north begins one of the last great wildernesses of earth, a wilderness which dwarfs into utter insignificance the narrow band of settlement, itself far from continuous, running from ocean to ocean.

Herein may lie the real explanation of our failure thus far to develop that positive aggressive personality our national advertising men yearn for. We are a people subconsciously aware of the gods, of mighty immanent forces.

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that compel us to acknowledge, however reluctantly, our own inconsequence.

McCourt's characters, in their confrontation with an environment which forces to the surface all their latent fears, consume all their energy in coming to terms with emotional conflict. They lack absolutely a sense of Canadian identity in any positive way, and yet in their struggle they may actually be more typically "Canadian" than if McCourt had attempted to infuse them with some positive sense of being "Canadian". Perhaps the struggle with environment becomes self-defeating, for individual Canadians may suffer more from feelings of isolation and alienation because they lack a sense of communal identity than those people who find their environment adverse but at least have a sense of national identity.

Anderson concludes his article in The Spectator by stating that "To be happy . . . in Canada . . . you must be a romantic and you must love snow." McCourt has shown that to be a romantic in Canada can be a terrifying and debilitating experience if the romantic sensibility is not strong enough, for it is only through a romantic leap, a moment of revelation, that the individual can live with his situation. Acquiring a faith may be mere escapism but, for Canadians, it is a necessity. Perhaps this explains the deeper reason for the "shattering endings" of McCourt's novels, a tendency Edmund Wilson notes in the novels of Hugh McLennan, and which could possibly be seen as one of the characteristics of Canadian fiction.

He may carry you through almost a whole book — as in The Watch That Ends the Night — by the power of poetic vision

20 The Road Across Canada, p. 198.
then let you down at the end in a spasm of revelation that will leave you disappointed because unconvinced. I think the trouble here is that he finds a certain difficulty in ending his novels because . . . he cannot bear to leave his characters, always exposed to possibilities of disaster, without some positive salvation and exaltation. His books are full of moral reawakenings. No matter how despairing one has been, one must pick oneself up in good order and not merely face life again but ride on in a gallant spirit.

Thus we come the full circle. McCourt has written five novels whose theme, the need for a faith in the face of utter vacuity, may be seen as significantly Canadian; and he has created five characters whose search, the quest for a sense of self, adds a rather sombre colour to the elusive and apparently many-faceted picture of "Canadian Identity."

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APPENDIX A

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF EDWARD A. McCOURT

Edward A. McCourt has been a Professor of English at the University of Saskatchewan for twenty-four years. He is married and has one son, Michael, who is a television news reporter for the C.B.C.

Born in Mullingar, Ireland (situated about fifty miles from Dublin) in 1907, McCourt was brought to Canada two years later by his parents who settled on a farm near Kitscoty, Alberta. After completing his public school education there, he continued his high school education by correspondence, there being no high school in the area. He went on to the University of Alberta where he majored in English. In 1932, at the height of the Depression in the West, he graduated with an Honours B.A. in English and was chosen as the province's Rhodes' Scholar. He spent the next two years at Oxford, studying under Edmund Blunden, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1934 and a Master of Arts degree in 1937. On his return to Canada he taught at Upper Canada College, Queen's University, and the University of New Brunswick before returning to the prairies in 1944.
APPENDIX B.
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