

Prodigals' Dreams:  
John McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun*

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**Abstract.** In this article I focus primarily on Irish writer John McGahern's last novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) and develop the argument that the parable of the Prodigal Son from the New Testament gospel of Luke offers a way to read McGahern's novels, an approach secured with his last novel. To give *Rising Sun* the necessary context for the prodigal discussion, I review the author's first five novels and briefly point out the journey motif in them. The longer discussion of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* then examines the various ways the parable offers us a lens through which to understand the return to Ireland of McGahern's protagonists. The article addresses recent scholarship, in particular Eamonn Hughes's study of *Rising Sun* in the Spring/Summer 2005 special edition of *The Irish University Review* dedicated to McGahern.

**Keywords.** John McGahern, Irish fiction, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, parable of the Prodigal Son, community, identity, journey, homecoming, tradition.

**Resumen.** En este artículo me centro principalmente en la última novela del autor irlandés John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) y propongo que la parábola del hijo pródigo del evangelio de Lucas del Nuevo Testamento da al lector las herramientas necesarias para acercarse a las novelas de McGahern, aproximación que se confirma en su última novela. Con el fin de contextualizar el tema del hijo pródigo en *Rising Sun* reseño las primeras cinco novelas y destaco el tema del viaje en ellas. En el análisis detallado de *That They May Face the Rising Sun* se examinan las varias maneras en las que la parábola nos brinda un criterio a través del cual podemos entender el regreso a Irlanda de los protagonistas de McGahern. El artículo se hace eco de investigaciones recientes, en particular el estudio de Eamonn Hughes en el volumen especial dedicado a McGahern de *The Irish University Review* en 2005.

**Palabras clave.** John McGahern, narrativa irlandesa, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, parábola del Hijo Pródigo, comunidad, identidad, viaje, regreso a casa, tradición.

John McGahern (1934-2006) was by many estimations one of Ireland's finest writers. His death from cancer in 2006 has left an artistic void world wide. His novels and short stories bridge the traditional and the experimental, and, taken as a whole, offer both a social portrait of 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland from the early deValera years to the onset of the late century economic boom, and, as

this paper will discuss, enact the archetypal prodigal journeys of human life. His sixth novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002)<sup>1</sup>, takes on a weightier position in the author's canon now that we see it as his last.

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1. Published in the United States as *By the Lake*, New York: Knopf, 2002. All quotes from the novel are taken from this edition.

*That They May Face the Rising Sun* offers a curious twist on twentieth-century Irish emigration literature. Many twentieth-century Irish writers, even if primarily concerned with other issues, have sent characters into exile, choosing emigration, as Seamus Deane wrote, “as the only solution in a country where the problems, and the ambiguities, seemed insolvable” (1986: 172). Joyce’s Stephen, Friel’s Gareth, O’Flaherty’s Michael and Mary Feeney, and Moore’s Alice Barton serve as prime examples. Even the personal victory of Synge’s Christie<sup>2</sup> is placed beside his departure. McGahern himself has portrayed an Ireland stagnant, closed, lonely, and depopulated where the urge to leave is prompted not so much by wanderlust as by self-preservation from suffocation by a “joyless and humiliating conformity” (Deane 1986: 180). This portrayal, writes Denis Sampson, offers an honest picture of the Ireland in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s (1991: 5).

While *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is about the Irish wanderer’s pursuit of dreams and about emigration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, McGahern has come full circle in his thematic journey, for here the immigrants, Joe and Kate Ruttledge, move to Ireland, not away from it, and for Joe it is a move back home.<sup>3</sup> Indeed in his review,

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2. Characters from, respectively, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Philadelphia Here I Come*, “Going Into Exile”, *Drama in Muslin*, and *The Playboy of the Western World*.

3. Returned Irish emigrants do appear in earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, but these figures tend to be caricatures and negative foils to the Irish protagonist. E.g. in J. B. Keane’s *The Field*, William Dee, a Galway man who has lived in England for twelve years returns to Ireland and wants to purchase a field away from Bull McCabe who has transformed it from a pile of stones to a fertile pasture. Dee plans to pave it over and turn it into a cement block factory. Ignatius Gallaher in Joyce’s “Little Cloud” has also moved to England. He is a bragging bag of hot air who has no interest in the life of his former friend. Visiting Irish Americans, sometimes called Yanks (as opposed to people born in the U.S.) don’t fare much better. Gar’s Aunt Lizzie in Friel’s *Philadelphia* is hard drinking, rough talking, and loud. She sentimentalizes Ireland and inflates America.

Deane says the novel “is a loving evocation ... [and] a celebration of an Ireland that had formerly been the object of chill analysis” (2002). Given the prevailing sentiment of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Irish writers, a sentiment McGahern obviously shared, what has changed? How can the author of *The Dark* be reconciled with the author of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*? Eamonn Hughes argues that McGahern’s last novel “seems to break with, rather than emerge from, any trajectory or pattern established by [his] earlier work” (2005: 147).<sup>4</sup> A closer analysis of the author’s last novel neither reverses the direction of Irish immigration literature nor breaks with the author’s other novels; rather, it continues the journey of all of McGahern’s protagonists in the circular manner of the parable of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel of Luke.

McGahern’s entire corpus of fiction has propelled his last protagonists back to the River Shannon headwaters in Counties Roscommon and Leitrim from where all his protagonists begin their journeys. His successive heroes have moved from place to place seeking that ever elusive dream of fulfillment and peace, independence and belonging. They originally flee from the confines of Irish life summed up by James Joyce as family, religion, and nationalism<sup>5</sup> to develop an individuality that enables

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McGahern’s Joe Ruttledge is very different. He recognizes the attributes of his native land and rejoins the community.

4. In his article “‘All That Surrounds Our Life’: Time, Sex, and Death in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*”, published in the issue dedicated to John McGahern of *The Irish University Review* (2005), Eamonn Hughes argues that the novel presents a departure from the rest of McGahern’s fiction in the lyrical prose style, the circular narrative structure, the absence of a dominant patriarch and single protagonist, and the focus on permanence over change.

5. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), James Joyce has Stephen Dedalus say, “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets”. Ch. 5. I read “language” as family, “nationality” as politics, and “religion” as Roman Catholicism.

them to resist the pressure to conform to social mores but sensitive to the values inherent in community life. By McGahern's late fiction, his protagonists, strong in their sense of self, can go home. The serendipitous journey begins in McGahern's first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), and a brief review of his earlier works serves to set his last novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, in a broader thematic context.

### **Novels 1963-1992: The Prodigal Journey**

In that first novel, the slow death from cancer of a forty-something woman, herself a returned emigrant, takes center stage. Hovering in the background are the seeds for McGahern's examination of another emigrant experience in the characters of Elizabeth Reagan's three step children. Following her death at the end of the novel, the embittered Sergeant Reagan plans to move from the Roscommon police barracks to a small rough western farm in pursuit of his own belated dreams. It is the experience of his three children that McGahern develops throughout the rest of his fiction.

*The Dark* (1965) was published two years later. Here we read the coming of age of a Connacht farm boy eking out an identity on a poor farm with an embittered and abusive widower father. By novel's end, young Mahony breaks free of his father's bonds and leaves the farm for first the priesthood, then the university, and finally a rather lack-luster civil service job in Dublin. While remaining in Ireland, his move from farm to city carries every bit the weight of an emigration.

By the third novel, *The Leavetaking* (1975), the pattern of motherless boys, western farms, the River Shannon, and concluding emigrations is firmly established. Each protagonist is beginning to build on the experience of the one before and continue the one journey. The novel opens with the hero in Dublin as a primary school teacher reflecting back on his rural childhood and his mother's death as he plans to migrate to England with the woman he loves. Here, for the first time a protagonist can escape the repression of his

youth. Beside this escape, Terence Killeen's observation that "the all important father [is] rather one dimensional" (1991: 77) makes symbolic and psychological sense. To assert himself, the narrator must marginalize his father.

Within five years, McGahern published *The Pornographer* (1980) in which we find an older unnamed protagonist in Dublin, alone, writing pornography, the medium itself reflective of the barren life he leads. We learn this man, too, came from the west and was a teacher. In this novel, he has immured himself from life after a failed love affair, suggesting the eventual disappointment of *The Leavetaking's* protagonist. This segment of the journey brings the pornographer into another love with a young fresh county nurse, and he is redeemed from his empty life with the promise of love, marriage, and, yes, a farm in the shadow of the Shannon River. These migrations appear to have turned a corner, and like the path of the Prodigal Son, McGahern seemed at that juncture to be bringing his hero back home.

Seemed is the operative word here. Even before the next novel, *Amongst Women*, critics questioned the transformation of the pornographer and the victory of his return. Early critics Eileen Kennedy (1983), Shaun O'Connell (1984), and Richard Lloyd (1987) agree that while the first three novels examine a protagonist isolated from his environment and needing to escape parents and community to establish his own identity, the fourth novel's apparent resolution is merely a concession. Kennedy, sees the pornographer's return to the farm as "strained" (1983: 126); O'Connell describes the final arc of the protagonist's life as completing a "pointless cycle ending in death" (1984: 259); and Lloyd suggests he returns to an "Ireland with all her attendant problems" (1987: 7).

Then in 1990, John McGahern published his most acclaimed novel, *Amongst Woman*. One could argue that this novel picks up where *The Pornographer* leaves off: set back in the west on a farm, and not the mangy patch of Mahony in *The Dark*, but a rich fertile rolling expanse built up from

scratch by Michael Moran with a grand name, Great Meadow. It would appear that the pornographer has returned and built a life after all, but, as the earlier critics predicted, the original refrains surface. Moran, too, is an embittered widower with young children. Attempts to contain all family life within the boundaries of the farm, expansive as it is, fail as Moran's children grow, and inevitably face off with him for independence in scenes reminiscent of Mahony and son in *The Dark*. Moran has rebuilt a world as stifling as the one young Mahoney left. If Michael Moran is our prodigal son, he has learned nothing from his journey. Indeed his eldest son, Luke, has left home before the novel opens and never returns. Michael's own return is a failure that merely sees the next generation on a similar path of exodus and emigration.

Though the Moran children move to Dublin and London, however, as they face the disappointments of life, they all find solace in their memories of Great Meadow. Luke, of course, is the exception. He remains a quiet reminder that all cannot be reconciled. For the others, Antoinette Quinn rightly observed that "the action, instead of radiating outwards, is centripetal, focusing on the metropolitan's magnetic attraction towards childhood country, the exile's attachment to fatherland" (1991: 79). So much so, that when their father dies, the children, now grown, incorporate their father's spirit into their own, prompting McGahern to narrate that they have "become Daddy". The author has thus managed to accommodate the realities of emigration while regaining the prodigal's desired spirit of home.

A final link to *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is the novella "The Country Funeral", the last in *The Collected Stories* (1992). James Whyte, in his 2002 study, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern*, recognizes a significant development at this stage in the writer's career: "While criticizing the repressive rule of church and state in the Ireland of his youth, McGahern laments [in adulthood] what he sees as the absence of a structured society and system of manners" (2002: 218). "The Country Funeral" chronicles Philly Ryan's trip from the arid oil fields

and empty hotel rooms of Tehran, the manifestation of an isolated and materialistic society, to his hostile and crass Dublin home, and then beyond to his uncle's funeral in the west, where, as if stumbling onto an oasis, the hero discovers the hospitality, community, traditions, and indeed the very beauty of his ancestral home. In the end, he buys his uncle's house with plans to move there after he retires.

Here too is another replay of the Prodigal son, the emigrant returning home to the truly green pastures that were always there. Only this time the story ends as happily as the original parable: a joyous return, a warm welcome. It is Philly's recognition of the gifts of Irish country life that distinguishes his move home from Michael Moran's retreat and the Pornographer's rejection of his urban life. The Pornographer's sphere of influence never grows beyond the personal, and Moran personifies isolationism and shuns his community. Philly embraces his Irish community and reconnects. Thus begins, Whyte writes, McGahern's "protagonist's move from isolation into relationship in a small community of accepted manners" (2002: 2).

### ***That They May Face the Rising Sun: The Prodigal Returns***

This brings us to *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), a novel that stands not only as a brilliant study of a moment in time of the life of a Leitrim market town, its people, and their way of life, but also, in light of the earlier works, as another step for the wandering Irish Prodigal. This step brings him towards his dreams, not in retirement but in midlife, dreams as green as the rolling banks of the Shannon fields, and this step brings him home. "Gone are the sharp conflicts of husband/wife, parent/child, priest/teacher", says John Breslin in his review in *Commonweal*, "Even the political metaphors that overlay Great Meadows at last have given way to a straight forward celebration of place and people in the full course of a year" (2002).

*That They May Face the Rising Sun* opens with, "The morning was clear" (3), an appropriate description both of the day and of the Ruttledge's decision to settle on this farm in County Leitrim. And what was it that had called them home? Like

McGahern's earlier protagonists, Joe Ruttledge "had grown up among such fields". He says early in the novel, "I had escaped through an education that would hardly have been possible a generation earlier" (23). And as Joe remembers back to when he and Kate bought the farm, he acknowledges the difficulty of returning to where his journey began: "Now I was face to face with all those dreams we have when we are young. I know these rushy fields, the poverty, the hardships. On that hill, I realized that this could be the rest of my life. It was far from what I had dreamed or hoped for". And yet life out of Ireland ran its course leaving them unfulfilled. About England, Joe says, "We have jobs. The life is easy and comfortable. We'd hardly be looking at places here if we were initially happy. [England's] not my country and I never feel it's quite real or that my life there is real" (23).

For the Ruttledge's, what first emerges as real back in Ireland are the green pastures themselves, their twenty acres of farmland with fields sprawling down to the shores of the unnamed lake that figures in almost all of McGahern's descriptions of the rural surroundings. All human activity is placed in its natural context, seasonal changes are noted, and narrative glances consistently affirm McGahern's unabashed delight in his own Leitrim landscape. Indeed human activity is mirrored in the natural imagery: "Close by, two swans fished in the shallows, three dark cygnets by their side. Further out a whole stretch of water was alive and rippling with a moving shoal of perch" (18). Hughes argues that it is the very expansiveness of McGahern's language about nature that in part separates *That They May Face the Rising Sun* from the stark and stoical prose of the other fiction (2005: 147). Yet the lush prose reflects the new perspective Joe has of his native soil, and through the prose McGahern allows us to also experience Joe's homecoming as a celebration. The reminder is never far from the story that we are at once nurtured by nature and humbled by it. In the Wordsworthian sense, the Ruttledges have immigrated to the very place where they are restored by the unchanging rhythms and events of nature:

The day disappeared in attendance on small tasks. The fly struck the lamps a second time. An old sheep was found on her back, two small lambs by her side ... When righted ... she checked that the lambs were hers before allowing them the joyous frenzy of their suck. Weeds had to be pulled in the garden; carrots, lettuce, onion, beets, parsnips were thinned; the beanstalks supported, the peas staked, the potato stalks and the fruit trees sprayed. The evenings they ate late. In the soft light the room seemed to grow green and enormous as it reached out to the fields and the crowns of the trees, the green banks and the meadow and trees to enter the room with the whole fullness and weight of summer (99).

Denis Sampson reads in scenes like the one above, McGahern's preoccupation with openings and enclosures, imagery that Sampson suggests revealed in McGahern's earlier works a human need to frame our lives or, in other words, a human need for art. Here, however, Sampson observes a shift: the image now offers humans a portal into something greater than art and reflects the urge to integrate with nature (2005: 144). Both interpretations of the same symbol enrich the prodigal reading of McGahern's canon in initially representing the perception of the traveler needing to shape his destiny, and then that of the home comer, able to reintegrate. Time itself is bound to nature in McGahern's world, notes Ryan Taylor in *The Yale Review of Books*, measured by the changes in the natural landscape (2005).

Family, community, and seasonal traditions also anchor the protagonists in this place. Ruttledge is visited every Sunday by his uncle, the Shah, we meet his widowed cousin and her children, invitations are extended for future visits. We come to know his neighbors Jamesie and Mary and hear their family stories from Johnny in England to Jim and Lucy in Dublin. Patrick Ryan has a dying brother, and even John Quinn a notorious womanizer has several handsome, successful, and loyal children. Family connections form a loosely woven fabric over the whole novel. And while McGahern does not sentimentalize family ties – indeed problems surface in them all – the Shah never fails to pull up at Joe and Kate's in his big Mercedes every Sunday afternoon for his ritual meal and

walk with Joe through the fields, Jamesie and Mary celebrate Johnny's visits each summer, and John Quinn's children surround him at his wedding.

Most striking in this novel is McGahern's focus on the traditional Irish custom of hospitality, what Sampson call the "central moral principle" (2005: 137). Like a chorus running through the novel, neighbors are welcomed and fed, toasted and assisted. Indeed the fifth line of the novel reads, "The doors of the house were open", and as Jamesie enters the Rutledge's home, Kate and Joe turn to him with "great friendliness" and say "You are welcome" (3). This scene recurs and emerges as a dominant motif in the novel. Even in a pub, Jamesie walks over to a table of tinkers and exclaims, "Mister and Missus McDonough, you are most welcome to the town"(162). Food and drink appear on tables, visitors are pressed to sit and rest, rounds are bought. McGahern repeatedly details the food at meals, the drinks being poured, the table settings, the flowers in vases. Perhaps insignificant singly, by their repetition, these details bespeak rich moments of shared time and space. Sampson says, "there is little doubt that a major part of McGahern's intention is to illustrate the 'manners' – the tact, intelligence, and imagination – required to preserve those values in a community of strong individuals" (137). McGahern replays the same rediscovery of the virtues of community that we saw surface in "The Country Funeral". If family connections form a loosely woven fabric over the characters, it is the community that provides the tighter supportive weave.

In a broader communal sense, the Rutledges participate in ritualistic events, both seasonal and religious, and "far from offering a critique of the oppressive aspects of these institutions", James Whyte suggests that McGahern searches for their "permanent ritualistic and mythical aspects" outside of their traditional institutional contexts (3). They celebrate John Quinn's wedding with the rest of the town, and they attend Johnny Murphy's funeral at the end of the novel. And we see them involved in the annual customs of mowing the fields, gathering the hay, selling the sheep in Roscommon, and auctioning their cattle on

Monaghan Day. In short, they become active members of their community. The seasonal rhythms of farm life become the rhythms of their own lives from tending to the births of calves and lambs to freeing lost cows from the tangles of wires. Sampson notes that the entire novel is structured around refrains: the repeating seasons, chores, and celebrations find echoes in repeated conversations and descriptions of nature (2005: 141-2). And in all this the Rutledge's find contentment, and perhaps, as Whyte notes, "transcendence" (2002: 3). After a hurling match on TV with Jamesie and a slow walk home around the lake, Joe sees his uncle in with Kate: "As he listened to the two voices he was so attached to and thought back to the afternoon, the striking of the clocks, the easy pleasant company, the walk around the shore, with a rush of feeling he felt that this must be happiness" (207).

McGahern's depictions of his other characters provide additional proof that Joe and Kate have found their way back home. Initially, we meet a catalog of Irish stereotypes: Jamesie the local gossip, Johnny the emigrant, Bill Evans the home boy, Patrick Ryan, the ornery tinker, and John Quinn the oversexed farmer – all of them drinkers. Sampson finds them to be as basic as Medieval humors (2005: 139), and Hughes sees them as types on the socioeconomic ladder (2005: 149).<sup>6</sup> But as we read, we come to know the three-dimensionality of these types. For all his nosiness, Jamesie was crucial to helping the Rutledges get established when the rest of the community waited for them to fail. Bill Evans the dour old man from the cruel foster care system displays a carefree delight in learning of his weekly trips to town; even John Quinn's self absorbed

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6. Interestingly, we can see in Hughes's descriptions of the characters as socioeconomic types – Bill, orphan hireling; Patrick, the tradesman; Jamesie, the small farmer; John Quinn, the land hungry peasant; the Shah, the rich merchant; and Johnny, the assembly line worker (148) – a hierarchy of the landed (or those desiring land): Bill → John → Jamesie; and the landless: Johnny → Patrick → the Shah. Further evidence of the success of Joe's homecoming can be measured in his continuation of both lines: farmer and writer.

womanizing is offset by his fine fathering. The emerging three-dimensionality of these characters reveals Kate and Joe's deeper engagement with their community. They have learned to differentiate and distinguish; they see below the surface: insights that underscore not only interest and commitment but, perhaps more importantly, membership.

While Joe Ruttledge's impressions of land, customs, and people mark his homecoming as returned prodigal and offer the most obvious connection to Luke's story, the parable provides other lenses through which to view the novel. As an allegory, it captures not only the dual forces of human nature – the need for independence and the need for community – it also addresses human relationships: one between father and son and the other between brothers. Luke tells the story of a father with two sons. The younger son takes his inheritance and leaves home until he has exhausted his funds and energy, and returns. The older son never leaves. The father welcomes the traveling son home with open celebratory arms much to the chagrin of the son who remained.

McGahern's novel speaks to these aspects of the story. Kate and Joe return to what is real, but like the returning prodigal son, they require help in reintegrating. They need the welcoming father and find teachers and guides throughout the novel. It is the Shah who lends the Ruttledges money to buy their land by the lake, who makes weekly visits, who builds their iron grill for the fireplace, who welds the broken plow blade. Patrick Ryan helps the Ruttledges repair the house when they first move in, explains the importance of a buried corpse facing the east in anticipation of the resurrection, and by example teaches them to accept his unpredictability, and by extension, the uncertainty of life. Indeed, Patrick's on again off again work on Joe's shed frames the time present of the novel. Even Bill Evans has a part in the Ruttledge's resettlement when he responds to Joe's questions about his past with an anguished "stop torturing me". Joe stands ashamed of his own "idle probing" (15) and learns appropriate behavior.

It is above all Jamesie and Mary Murphy

who provide the parental welcome, support, and guidance. They offer the new couple supplies and friendship soon after moving to the lake despite the silent disapproval of other neighbors. Jamesie brings Joe perspectives on daily rural life when he snaps Joe out of his sorrow over a lost lamb – "You can quit that...Anybody with livestock is going to have deadstock" (283), when he nudges Joe to stay silent before Patrick Ryan's antagonism, and when he explains the need for not discussing politics on days of national remembrance – "Big show. Big blow. Importance" (277) is what the politicians need. There is an ethereal quality about Jamesie's appearances just as Joe and Kate need help. He stands watch over a lost heifer until Joe arrives, prompting Joe to call him an "Angel of the Lord" (61) and knocks on the Ruttledge's door suggesting a party which lifts Kate and Joe out of a sadness. Kate admits to Jamesie, "You were like an angel coming today" (284). When Joe and Kate face a day of lifting heavy bales of hay, along come Mary and Jamesie: "Their hearts lifted. A weight of heavy repetitious work stretching into the evening rain was suddenly halved and made light" (143). Joe's warm recognition of Jamesie's importance in his resettlement is seen at the end of the novel when Joe, whose life by then is inextricably interwoven into this community, responds to Jamesie's enthusiastic proclamation of knowing the world without ever leaving the lake with, "You do know the whole world...and you have been my sweet guide" (333).

McGahern also explores the other dynamic of the Prodigal Son story, the response of the older son to his returning brother and the relationship between the brothers themselves. In his critical study of the parable, David Wyatt discusses the central theme as one of returning home, but with the returning only having meaning in relation to the journey, an experience that becomes the story of an individual's life. The prodigal son, through his leaving and returning, has a story to tell that includes his brother's experience at home and his own away from home. The older son who never leaves forfeits the chance to author his own story. In essence, he will always remain a

boy because his identity will forever be shadowed by the father's. One's self-recognition, Wyatt explains, can occur only through asserting a "fundamental doubleness" between father and son. The older son intuits that to leave would cost him his obedience and therefore his innocence. For the traveler his disobedience offers experience and independence. And for him, Wyatt says, there is a turn, the moment when each of us, as the author of his own life, "makes an accommodation with authority and ceases wrestling with his role as son" (1980: xiii-xv). Only then can the Prodigal return to the benefits of home and community secure in his individuality. And while one dimension of the home front welcomes the weary traveler, the open armed father, another, the older brother, looks resentfully and jealously at the returning son because, in staying home, he has sacrificed experience for obedience. In this regard father and older son are two facets of the same home. And to further complicate the dynamics, by virtue of his greater knowledge beside his brother's inexperience, the wayward younger brother assumes a fatherly role with his older brother.

We see both parts, father and older son, played out in *Rising Sun* in the same cast of characters. Each fatherly figure in the novel also embodies the older son in his childishness, innocence, and immature aggression, and as such, offers us a means to measure the changes that have taken place in Joe Ruttledge during his time away. Like the older son of Luke's parable, these men have never left home (Johnny is the exception, but he cannot return). McGahern's language is significant in describing them: Patrick says Jamesie is "pure child" (52); even Mary says Jamesie "is like a child" (214); the Shah says "John Quinn is a boy" (49); Joe notices that Patrick Ryan speaks of the grand houses he worked in with the "unformed longing of a boy" (54) and that the Shah was "as vulnerable as a child to loss of face" (257) after the sale of his business; Bill Evans follows Mary and Kate "as trustingly as a child" (145); Johnny asks Joe "in a childlike voice 'You won't forget to collect me?'" (299); Even Big Mick Madden who

appears briefly towards the end of the novel is described as "aggressive and boastful" but still "engagingly boyish" (277). There is a childlike simplicity about Frank Dolan who needs Joe to guide him through the technicalities of a bank loan and the innocent Sweeney family overrun by the likes of John Quinn. Joe and Kate return to a host of older brothers who in never leaving the lake remain forever children, forever single men (with the exception of Jamesie but even in his case, Mary is more a mother than a wife), forever conforming to social norms, and forever afraid of public opinion.

This childishness plays out in a variety of other ways: for Jamesie, "all forms of social intercourse were merely different kinds of play" (4). He knows no restraint and fears any level of conflict. So nervous is he of a dinner party at the Ruttledges, that he drinks himself unconscious so not to have to face new people. Jamesie's view of the world does not extend beyond the lake. Jim's trip to Italy might as well have been to Pluto for all Jamesie knows, and his annual drive to the next county, Roscommon, to sell the sheep has all the intrigue of a visit to a foreign land. The Shah's childish self-absorption is reflected in always having his own way. The priest comes to him to deliver communion, he marches his corpulent physique through a hotel lobby in swimming trunks, and insists on his meals at four o'clock with no talking until dessert. The Shah, too, seems cast adrift by travel. With great relief, he prematurely ends a holiday at the seaside resort. Bill Evans is only aware of immediate creature comforts; he "could no more look forward than he could look back. He existed in a small closed circle of the present" (189). He, of all the older brother types, has the hardest life and as an old man, his face was lined by hardship, "but the eyes had learned nothing" (285). John Quinn lives in perpetual puberty, and even Johnny, who did move away, never matured beyond the young man who left. His life propels itself by habit in his assembly line job, his regular drink in his regular pub at his regular time, and his repeatedly insisting that everything is "alphabetical". Certainly his simultaneous longing and inability to move back to Ireland, and his psychic need



of life remaining as it was by the lake when he left Ireland suggests his stymied growth. All of these details reveal facets of immaturity: a fear of change, self-absorption, and a sense of time as eternally now. Like children, these characters have a narrow context in which to measure or know themselves, and right or wrong is judged by personal loss or gain.

Patrick Ryan is perhaps the most formidable force for Joe and Kate to contend with since their move to the Leitrim lake-side farm. Fatherly in the respects already discussed, and similar to the other men of the lake in his childishness, his bachelorhood, and his home by the lake, in Patrick alone do we witness the contempt and the resentment the older brother feels for the returning prodigal. Early in the novel, he bursts into the Ruttlidges' home demanding a ride to town (to see a younger brother towards whom, significantly, he only shows contempt). Another time, he condescendingly tosses a cigarette butt to Joe and commands he dispose of it. He is openly hostile to Kate because she continues her household work during one particular visit, a hostility that stubbornly blinds him to Kate's advice about staying away from her agitated bees. He suffers a ghastly attack as a result. Soon after, his mood turns dark when Joe doesn't want to discuss his and Kate's childlessness. His hostility towards Kate can be explained by her inattention and perhaps by the threat of her sexuality itself. She is a constant reminder of an adult relationship beyond what Patrick knows, and his need to discredit her stands as another attack on Joe and remains a thread throughout the novel. Patrick is the child who bullies his way to the top of the sand pile and demands complete attention; he is thus most threatened by Joe. He refuses to learn from him (or Kate). Late in the novel, Joe's assistance at Johnny's wake in the place of the absent Patrick, and Patrick's later emergence from the dark woods as Joe and Kate pass by take on greater import: Joe has replaced Patrick as a vital community presence and a sinister Patrick tries to scare Joe away. Patrick's final insistence on completing the shed perhaps can be seen as his putting an end to the Ruttlidges' life by the lake. Kate's

counterpoint that the shed can wait, in this light, suggests the Rutledge's life there as a work in progress without end, and, along with the sexuality implicit in her femininity, explains why Patrick literally turns his back to her in that final scene and darkly challenges Joe.

If Patrick is the dark side of the older brother, Jamesie is the endearing side. McGahern underscores the contrast with light imagery. Walking away from Jamesie and Mary after Johnny's funeral, they turned for another wave and there "Jamesie and Mary stood framed in the light" (333). Minutes later as the couple approach their own house, Patrick Ryan steps into their path "white shirt and face and silver hair glowing. Everything else was black and merged with the night" (334).

Alongside the impressions of home and the relationships between father and sons is a third theme suggested by the parable which involves the independence Joe maintains while becoming part of his community. As in the New Testament account, Joe comes home, but comes home changed from the man he was when he left. McGahern dramatizes his changes in the contrasts between Joe and the other characters and in Joe's responses to the rituals of his community. He is able to select which customs and rituals he wishes to participate in and which traditions nurture his life. His Ireland is, as Deane says, "part-created, part-inherited" (2002). Having left Ireland once, he can place all of Irish life in a global context and thus resist those customs that would stifle his soul. Jamesie is his neighbor and good friend, yet all of Jamesie's urgings to attend mass are easily refused. Joe can also turn down a drink and defend his preferences before the domineering Shah. He can refuse Patrick Ryan's subordinating commands and face the Republican Jimmy Joe's pointed query, "You don't seem to have any interest in our cause", with an unabashed "No...I don't like violence" (323). He chooses to participate or not in local customs, has the strength to stand publicly by his choices, and, perhaps more significantly, feels no guilt. With Joe Rutledge, McGahern quietly and deftly unknots James Joyce's three stifling claustrophobic nets of Irish life: family, church, and politics.

So through the Ruttledges' engagement in all aspects of their home, their relationships with their neighbors, and their selected participation in local customs, we see a place suited to their natures and needs. The ongoing restoration of their farm stands as a symbol of their rootedness. As a final measurement of the success of this immigration, we can look to a fourth strand of the narrative which McGahern develops simultaneously along with the other three: the growing need the community has of them. Joe grows into the paternalistic role of the parable. Eamon Maher goes so far as to call him a "seer" and a "prophet" (2003: 136). From the neighbor's expectations of their failure, and, indeed, being openly excluded from Edmund Ryan's funeral early in the novel, McGahern chronicles the central role Joe and Kate increasingly play in the lives of those around them: Joe gives shelter to Bill Evans locked out on a winter's day, he drives Patrick to the hospital and Jamesie to the slaughter house, he stores the Shah's money box when he goes away, he mows Jamesie's fields at hay time, he brokers the sale of the Shah's business to the benefit of both seller and buyer, and in the end, it is Joe who stands in for Patrick Ryan at Johnny's wake and lays out the body, a function of supreme community importance, and a striking contrast to the exclusion of the Ruttledges at the earlier funeral in the novel. The Ruttledges themselves have not only taken root, they have grown fruit to feed those around them. We see these nurturing qualities displayed on a daily basis on their farm in coaching the birthing heifer, searching out the lost sheep, and nursing the injured feral cat. Like the Moran daughters in *Amongst Women*, Joe and Kate have "become Daddy".

The very arguments Eamonn Hughes makes regarding language, character, perspective, and structure for *Rising Sun* being a break from the earlier fiction rather than a trajectory, thus emerge as confirmation of the trajectorial relationship in terms of the Prodigal Son reading. The lake environs is the home, the same home Mahony in *The Dark* leaves, the reminder of which is articulated by Joe Ruttledge's memory of his own youth. This home is transformed because of Joe's journey, Joe

being the culmination of all McGahern's travelers. His experiences, his independence, and his secure identity allow him to see his home differently. The lyrical prose and the lush natural descriptions that Hughes sees as a break from the terse Joycian "meanness" of McGahern's earlier prose (2005: 147) (particularly that before *Amongst Women*) reflects the changed sensibility in the Prodigal traveler lately home. And perhaps we can also recognize the urge to forgive and reconcile of the author himself as he not only sees his own spare Leitrim home with the softened perspective of age, but with the knowledge that he has not much longer to savor its beauty, having already been diagnosed with cancer.

The absence of a domineering patriarch in this last novel also emerges as a continuum from the earlier fiction. The prodigal story is about the son's earned equality with the father, a relationship McGahern has prepared us for in *Amongst Women* with the death of the patriarch. Hughes himself acknowledges the story of Michael Moran and his daughters is transitional in this respect (2005: 151). Even in the middle novels, the domineering father is marginalized: he only exists in *The Pornographer* as a kindly uncle, and, as already noted, in *The Leavetaking* as a one-dimensional memory. Not since McGahern's first two novels, *The Barracks* and *The Dark* has he been an on-going threat. Reagan in the former is a disillusioned patriot whose disappointment with Irish society is exacerbated as his second wife dies of cancer and he faces caring for his three young children alone. It is of course the children that bear the brunt of his frustration. And Mahony in the latter is driven to full fledged anger and abuse by the same disappointments coupled with poverty and back-breaking work on his farm. The novels since *The Dark* have brought the McGahern protagonist out from under his father's shadow while literally bringing him back to the same Leitrim fields.

And while the social perspective of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* does set the novel apart from the earlier work, the focus on the social rather than a central individual highlights the reintegration of the Prodigal

into his community.

The solo journey chronicled in the earlier fiction is only part of the whole prodigal story; the conclusion requires a reentry into the group, and a reentry that includes retaining the selfhood earned in the journey without dominating the community. McGahern strikes the balance with Joe Rutledge: he is at once central and part of the ensemble cast. *Amongst Women* is again transitional in that its widening focus from individual to the family serves as the conduit to the community focus in *Rising Sun*.

*That They May Face the Rising Sun* is an ode both to rural Irish community life at the turn of the Twenty-First Century and to Prodigal homecomings. While the need to leave and then return is driven by the successive needs for independence from and then participation in community, as reflected in the story of Joe and Kate and in the references to dozens of other emigrations by other characters, another set of polarities is at work as well: permanence and change. Hughes's most forceful argument against *That They May Face the Rising Sun*'s connection to the rest of McGahern's fiction lies in the emphasis of change over time in the earlier fiction contrasted with his use of timeless repetitions in his last novel (2005: 154-155).<sup>7</sup> In the prodigal model, however, this

shift to timeless repetitions emerges as a significant indicator that *Rising Sun* is a logical conclusion to the changes over time of the other fiction. The journey defines the reality of change in the human experience, and up until *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, all McGahern's characters have been travelers. In his later fiction, the shape of the journey is revealed as circular, the circle closing upon the prodigal's return in *Rising Sun*. The return thus suggests the need for something else: in the repeating rhythms of human rituals and traditions and the even greater rhythms of nature we satisfy the need for permanence. Ultimately all human journeys and all human experiences anticipate the greatest change, death. It is no surprise then that faced with death, we grasp onto the permanent for support. Joe's closest view of death, the laying out of Johnny's body, coincides with his upholding a community's most revered tradition, the funeral. It is through such traditions that we find not only the strength but the eagerness to face, as the title of the novel suggests, "the rising sun".

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7. Hughes's discussion of sexlessness in the lake community is worth noting here. He observes that "sex as generation" is not happening with anyone, including Joe and Kate (2005: 160), an observation that takes timelessness in the direction of the end of time.

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