

Profiling and Windows of Attention in John McGahern's *The Dark*

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1. A linguistic approach to literature

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the application of cognitive linguistic principles and techniques to the analysis of literary texts. Scholars and researchers have agreed upon calling this integrated discipline *Cognitive Stylistics* or *Cognitive Poetics*.

Within this discipline, Cognitive Grammar has blurred the traditional boundary separating linguistics from literature by arguing that ordinary and literary language forms are continuous rather than dichotomous. Cognitive Grammar proposes a unified account of lexicon and grammar, thus claiming that language consists of a “structured inventory of conventional linguistic units, and the selection of certain grammatical forms imposes certain construals which represent anything we experience and are embodied, grounded in our experiences as human beings (Langacker, 2014: XIII-XIV).

In this paper, we will mainly draw upon the stylistic principles dealt with in Harrison, Nuttal, Stockwell and Yuan (2014).

2. Profiling and Attentional Windowing in *The Dark*

In this section we will direct our attention to three different and relevant passages of *The Dark*, which constitute the main focus of our analysis.

2.1. *The Pit of Horror*

The first passage is at the very beginning of the novel, in chapter 1, when Mahoney is telling his son off for having uttered a rude word. The reprimand goes a bit too far and it almost ends up with a beating.

Let us concentrate on how John McGahern grounds the action here, that is, the usage event, the participants and the relationship between them and the immediate circumstances in which the action takes place. The author directs the reader's attention to a series of foregrounded elements: the attractors of attention. These attractors of attention are profiled or windowed against the broader background of the bedroom, and the house in general. The author employs a sort of mental scanning technique to develop his chain of windows of attention. I have compared this technique, profiling, to a camera moving around and zooming in on some elements to make them stand out because of their relevance from a semantic point of view for the author to communicate his message.

The very beginning of the chapter as well as of the novel itself is a rude word, spelt word by word (*F-U-C-K*). The fact that the word is spelt and not properly uttered foresees the dominating mood of the passage and of the whole novel: sexual repression. The dominion of SEX is automatically activated. The *camera* then moves on and focuses on Mahoney Jr.'s mind (*the filth that's in your head*). Then our attention is taken to the father's rage, mad with anger (*the blood mounted to his face*), whereby Mahoney's feelings are metaphorically conceptualized as liquids inside a container and, when we reach the girl's room, the attention zooms in on *the picture of the Ascension*, a religious motif dominating the terrible scene, activating the dominion of RELIGION, which is going to interact with SEX throughout the novel. Here, there is a multimodal parallelism between the Ascension of Jesus and their going upstairs where the bedrooms are and where the beating will take place. The implicit message seems obvious.

The *camera* then goes back to Mahoney's rage and is metonymically described by profiling his mouth (*a white froth showed on his lips*) and, finally, on the instrument of torture, the belt is conceptualized both metaphorically as an extension of Mahoney's body and metonymically as part of that body (*the belt twitched on his trousers, an animal's tail*). This qualifies as a vivid instance of metaphonymy (Goossens, 1990). Metonymy extends its scope by referring to the belt as *the leather*, and *the leather of the armrest*, where the boy is supposed to be beaten. The dominion of PATRIARCHY comes into play at this point, and it is also going to be pervading throughout the novel, qualifying itself as an important ambience enactor.

The emotions of both Mahoney Jr. and his sister are the elements profiled next: *The shivering fits of crying* and *Mona's frightened wailing*, but the camera then goes back to the belt, the instrument of repression, the tail of the animal that his father seems to be: *the leather hanging dead in his hand*. The religious parallelism outlined above becomes apparent with the next attractor: *he'd never known such a pit of horror*. The room, dominated by a religious image, is described as a *pit of horror*, the word *pit* bearing a double semantic load: nest (the family home) and Hell (as opposed to Heaven).

The last attractor in this scene is the *reek of Jeyes Fluid*, a disinfectant, in the *comforting darkness of the old bolted refuge of the lavatory*, which qualifies for an instance of multimodal metaphor whereby Mahoney Jr. attempts to escape his dad's "infection".

McGahern grounds the action through a series of action chains in a sequential scanning. We will use Talmy's (2000) notion of force dynamics and Langacker's concepts of trajector and landmark to analyze these clauses. Let us take a close look at the following clauses excerpted from the passage:

Say what you said because I know

I'm going to teach you a lesson for once

Come on with me. Upstairs. I'll teach you a lesson for once.

Into that chair with you. On your mouth and nose. I'll give your arse something it won't forget in a hurry.

Move and I'll cut that arse off you.

Shut up that racket and get on your feet.

Mahoney, the father, is the trajector. The action starts in him, and he is the source of the action expressed by process verbs. The landmark is obviously Mahoney Jr., who is at the same time the recipient of the actions initiated by his father. These clauses are aligned temporally using the active voice, following the direction and dynamics of the actions. Deontic modality is also present; Mahoney is determined to force his son into submission and punishment. The use of bare imperatives without any downtoners and future time constructions primarily serve to convey this kind of modality.

Some other instances of this trajector-landmark relationship are of a metonymic nature, when the author drives our attention to part of the

trajector, specifically to the leather belt in Mahoney's hand, the attention attractor:

The belt twitched against his trousers

[...] waiting naked for the leather to come down on his flesh

[...]the leather came, exploding with a shot on the leather of the armrest over his ear

Passive constructions, epistemic modality expressing inability and uncertainty and deontic modals of obligation are preferred when the landmark, Mahoney Jr., is profiled, when the *camera* zooms in on him. He is the affected participant and he is not in control of what is happening around him:

[...] he had to lie in the chair, lie there as a broken animal.

He couldn't control his water

[...] waiting naked for the leather to come, would it ever come,

[...] and he was willed by fear back on his mouth and nose, not able to move

[...] he couldn't get any grip of what had happened to him

The word opened such a floodgate that he had to hurry out of the room

The situation is out of control for Mahoney Jr., to such an extent that his own feelings are depicted as something external, alien to him, something that gets to him, affecting his state. Together with the use of the omniscient narrator, the viewing arrangement is objectively construed:

The shivering fits of crying came and went

The worst was the vapoury rush of thoughts

[...] to sit in the comforting darkness and reek of Jeyes Fluid to weep and grope their way in hatred and self-pity back into some sort of calm.

At a suprasentential level we find an instance of conceptual splicing (Talmy, 2000). Conceptual splicing takes place when the central part of a process is not windowed, but gapped. It is defined by Talmy as a discontinuous windowing by which the conceptualizers move from location A to destination C, with a windowed agent and result, and a gapped path.

In the passage, the author makes reference to Mahoney's dead wife. The narrator makes allusion to happier days when she was alive, but we never

actually get to know what happened really, and how the situation at the family home has evolved so miserably:

You'd think there'd be some respect for your dead mother left in the house.

His mother had gone away years before and left him to this. Day of sunshine he'd picked wild strawberries for her on the railway she was dying.

As for the vague notion of ambience, we will discuss it from two different points of view: tone and atmosphere.

Tone, or subjective construal, reflects the feelings and emotions of the characters and it also reflects the feelings and emotions of the author himself.

a) Mahoney's cruelty is subjectively construed through the use of nominals and adjectival phrases which depict him as dehumanized beast:

the filth that's in your head, horrible measured passion, blood mounted to his face, a white froth showed on his lips, exploding with a shot,

This passage is written almost completely in a nominal style, with only one finite verb (*showed*)

b) Mahoney Jr. and his sister Mona appear as vulnerable and defenseless. This is conveyed by nominals, adjectival constructions mainly in predicative position and some prepositional phrases:

in fright, in a dazed horror, as a broken animal, naked, horror such as this, his whole body stiff, sweat breaking, the anguish and squalor was impossible, the same hysterical struggle, the hands clumsy and shaking

Atmosphere, or objective construal, is applied here to the immediate surrounding environment, the family home, where the actions of the passage are taking place. The atmosphere of the house is gloomy, oppressive and miserable. A feeling of emptiness and hopelessness pervades everything. This is reflected in the use of nominals, attributive adjectival phrases and verbal phrases, when the author directs our attention to certain elements in the house:

the heavy leather strap he used for sharpening his razor

[...] a black leather armchair stood beside the empty fireplace.

A religious component is also present in the general atmosphere of the house. The picture of the Ascension presiding the girls' bedroom upstairs and the use of the word *profane* by Mahoney give proof of this. McGahern is making a statement here, hinting his antagonism at the Catholic Church.

2.2. The Human Side of God

The following excerpts under study in the present paper belong to chapters 11 and 12. In these chapters, young Mahoney is considering the possibility of becoming a priest, a prestigious position in Ireland at the time. His cousin, Father Gerald, offers him his influence and invites him to spend some weeks at the priest's house so as to have the opportunity to become familiar with a priest's daily life and duties, and eventually to come up with a decision. The events that will happen at the priest's house will dissipate any kind of doubt young Mahoney might have had.

In the first passage, they have just finished having dinner on his first night at Father Gerald's house:

It was shocking to see a priest without his collar for the first time. The neck was chafed red. The priest looked human and frail.

"I always have to eat just before bed, since I was operated on, they cut two thirds of my stomach away that time."

"When was that, father?"

"In Birmingham. I hadn't felt well for ages but put it on the long finger. Then I suddenly collapsed in the sacristy as I was unrobing myself after Mass. The surgeon said it was a miracle I pulled through."

He yawned and in the same sleepy movement began to unbutton his trousers. He drew up the shirt and vest to show his naked stomach, criss-crossed by two long scars, the blue toothmarks of the stitches clear. He showed the pattern of the operation with a finger spelling it out on the shocking white flesh.

The first foregrounded element, the first window of attention in this passage is the priest's Roman collar, which is something archetypical in their attire. Then, the attention is focused on his collarless neck, revealing his flesh for the first time, flesh which is affected (*chafed red*) by the continuous wearing of the collar. This is the first sign of humanity in the priest. The attention is then zoomed in on a very down-to-earth action, the unbuttoning of his trousers, not precisely what anyone could expect to see a priest doing, and certainly not a

holy or pious action. But the most striking window of attention activates when Father Gerald reveals his naked stomach bearing two dreadful scars in the form of a cross, with scary stitches. A parallelism becomes inevitable here, between the holy cross and the shape of the priest “stigma”.

This profiling process construes a metonymic conceptualization of the priest, bestowing him with unexpected human weaknesses, and it ends up yielding a multimodal metaphor, THE CROSS IS SUFFERING.

Clausal grounding has a peculiar nature in this excerpt, as the trajector and the landmark are the same. Father Gerald is talking about himself and his experience with illness in the past. We find the use of the first person subject and reflexive pronouns. Modality and the passive voice help reinforce this affected role of the priest in this passage:

I always have to eat just before bed, since I was operated on
I hadn't felt well for ages but put it on the long finger
I suddenly collapsed in the sacristy as I was unrobing myself after Mass

The clauses uttered by the narrator also give the priest this affected role, as the third person singular pronoun acts as the trajector, but the landmark is the priest himself, his clothes, or part of his anatomy:

He yawned and in the same sleepy movement he began to unbutton his trousers
He drew up the shirt and vest to show his naked stomach
He showed the pattern of the operation with a finger spelling it out on the shocking
white flesh

Ambience is restricted to tone in this extract. The subjectively construed description of the priest's anatomy leaves little or no room for an objective atmosphere. Tone is construed through a number of nominals and predicative adjectival phrases bearing a somewhat negative semantic load, that is, adjectives that convey meanings related to weakness, illness and unpleasant surprise (in bold type below). These are unexpected and startling circumstances for an influential person like the priest, a man of God:

It was **shocking** to see a priest without his collar
The neck was **chafed red**. The priest looked human and **frail**.

[...] his **naked** stomach, **criss-crossed** by **two long scars**

[...] the blue toothmarks of the **stitches** clear

[...] the pattern of the operation [...] on **the shocking white flesh**

The next passages are from chapter 12. After having dinner with the priest, Mahoney Jr. is finally left to himself in his bedroom at night. He feels the oppression and the hopelessness that pervades everything at Father Gerald's house. He feels death is all around while he contemplates the garden and the graveyard in the moonlight:

The presence of the dead seemed all about, every stir of mouse or bird in the moonlit night, the crowded graves, the dead priest who'd collected the grandfather clocks. You grew frightened though you told yourself there was no reason for fear and still your fear increased, same in this bed as on the road in the country dark after people and cards, nothing about, till haunted by your own footsteps your feet go faster. You tell yourself that there's nothing to be afraid of, you stand and listen and silence mocks you, but you cannot walk calm any more. The darkness brushes about your face and throat. You stand breathing, but you can stand for ever for all the darkness cares. Openness is everywhere about you, and at last you take to your heels and run shamelessly, driven by the one urge to get to where there are walls and lamps.

Profiling in this excerpt deals with parts of young Mahoney's anatomy (*your feet, your face, your heels*) as well as emptiness, nothingness and darkness. Nominals bearing such semantic loads are abundant here, and they have a predominant role in nominal objective grounding. The atmosphere of the passage (and of the priest's house in general) is somber and lugubrious. A number of noun phrases construe the atmosphere: *the dead, moonlit night, crowded graves, the country dark, nothing, silence, darkness, openness*.

Tone is also relevant to this excerpt. McGahern grounds the situation in a very subjective way employing a series of stylistic techniques:

a) A number of nouns and predicative adjectives expressing young Mahoney's feelings: You grew *frightened, your fear increased, haunted by your own footsteps your feet go faster, you cannot walk calm any more*.

b) The use of inanimate, intangible entities as subjects and trajectors of a series of action clauses in which the boy is the landmark and the affected participant at the same time:

[...] and silence mocks you

The darkness brushes about your face and throat

c) Modality also contributes to clausal grounding. Modal constructions express uncertainty and inability:

[...] you told yourself there was no reason for fear

You tell yourself there's nothing to be afraid of

[...] you cannot walk calm any more

[...] you can stand for ever for all the darkness cares

d) The consistent use of the second person narrator instead of the more obvious first person one, when Mahoney Jr. is telling us his own story, reveals itself as a convenient technique to construe perspective in the passage. We are presented with a case of split-selves here (Emmott, 2002). McGahern provides the reader with an alter ego of young Mahoney. However, this alter ego turns up as his real, hidden self, who accusingly talks to the *counterfeit* Mahoney and detaches himself from the world that surrounds him. His dislike and hostility to the priest, the house with the graveyard, and religion in general gets bigger by the minute. The split-self technique subjectively construes perspective.

Suddenly, the boy receives an unexpected nightly visit, Father Gerald. They discuss the boy's prospects of becoming a priest, in a rather unusual way:

A low knock came on the door. Before you could say "Come in," it opened. A figure stood in the darkness above the wall.

"You're not asleep?"

It was the priest's voice, some of the terror broke, you let yourself back on your arms again.

"No," there was relief, but soon suspicion grew in place of the terror, what could the priest want in the room at this hour, the things that have to happen.

"I heard you restless. I couldn't sleep either, so I thought it might be a good time for us to talk"

He wore a striped shirt and pyjamas, blue stripes on grey flannel it seemed when he moved into the moonlight to draw back a corner of the bedclothes.

"You don't mind, do you, it's easier to talk this way, and even in the summer the middle of the summer gets cold."

"No, father. I don't mind," what else was there to say, and move far out to the other edge of the bed, even then his feet touching you as they went down. The bodies lay side by side in the single bed.

The general background of the scene is the dark bedroom in the priest's house late at night. Against this obscurity, profiling is structured through a series of windows of attention. The first foregrounded element appears in the form of schematization: *A figure stood in the darkness*, in an attempt to dehumanize the priest. The author insists on not showing us the full picture, adding mystery and mistrust: *the priest's voice* and *the priest's pyjamas*. Then, we are made aware of a spot of moonlight in the dark room and *a corner of the bedclothes*, against its immediate background, the bed. We are surrounded by darkness in this scene, and we are only allowed to focus on parts of the anatomy of both the priest and young Mahoney. These profiled parts of the body become essential to ground the action at a clausal level:

Action clauses employ dynamic verbs with a high degree of transitivity in the active voice to convey the sense of movement. The trajector is always the priest or a part of the priest's body, which is metonymically conceptualized. The landmark and affected participant is young Mahoney, or rather, parts of his body, which looks like what the priest is going after:

[...] he moved into the moonlight to draw back a corner of the bedclothes.

His hand closed on your arm.

[...] afraid before anything of meeting the eyes you knew were searching for your face

His hand was moving on your shoulder.

The roving fingers touched your throat

[...] he moved his face closer to ask, his hand quiet, clasping tighter on the shoulder.

Moreover, inanimate trajectors related to the priest's actions have an effect on the boy's mood:

[...] some of the terror broke

[...] suspicion grew in place of terror

[...] resentment risen close to hatred

Modality is abundant all over the excerpt. The object of modality here is mainly to convey the idea of doubt about the prospect of a religious career and uncertainty about the priest's intentions. This is construed by the use of:

a) Modals, adjectives and adverbials:

[...] what **could** the priest want in the room at this hour

[...] "it **might** be a good time for us to talk."

You **could** think of nothing to say.

You **couldn't** do or say anything.

You **couldn't** say any more, you **had to** fight back tears

[...] "I **can't** be **certain**. I thought **maybe**..."

He **must** have committed sins

Some of the modals are deontic, revealing the superior position of the priest, very much used to giving orders and advice:

"You must pray to God to give you Grace to avoid this sin"

[...] "you'll find your passion easier to control"

And pray, as I will pray for you too, that God may well direct you."

b) Verbal constructions:

[...] what else **was there to say**,

You **wanted to curse or wrench** yourself free

You'd **wanted to share, rise** on admittance together

c) Conditional constructions:

If you have these and the desire to give your life to God, then you have a vocation

I thought maybe **if** I went out into the world for a few years to test myself, then I could be sure.

[...] and **if** you did it would be harder than now

However, the last conditional construction makes us aware of who is in power here. It does not express uncertainty or doubt. It definitely sounds more like a warning or a threat:

"God guard you and bless you. **Sleep if you can.**"

d) Interrogative declarative constructions:

The priest's tentative approach to young Mahoney in the middle of the night makes him switch to an informal question structure, the interrogative declarative. He is well aware that he is doing something he is not supposed to be doing, and selects this informal register to sound closer and friendlier:

"You're not asleep?"

"You find it hard to sleep?"

“You have a good idea why I invited you here?”

“You’ve thought about the priesthood since? You know that that’s one of the reasons why I wanted you here?”

Perspective here is construed by the use of second person narrator and the frequent use of free indirect speech to express the boy’s inner thoughts and torments. The author is again making use of the split-self technique to detach the protagonist from the tough reality he is bound to deal with, and it may be interpreted as an overt attack on puritan values and sexual repression and child abuse:

[...] “what could the priest want in the room at this hour, the things that have to happen.

[...] you stiffened when his arm went about your shoulder, was this to be another of the midnight horrors with your father.

You’d listened with increase irritation and hatred, you wished the night could happen again. You’d give him his own steel.

As for ambience, atmosphere is objectively construed through nominals denoting darkness, obscurity. The whole passage takes place in the middle of the dark night, the only light being the feeble, wan moonlight.

The tone here is different, though. The subjective construal of the boy’s feelings is reflected in a number of nominals with a negative semantic load: *terror, suspicion, bodies, midnight horrors, resentment, dirt, increasing irritation, his own steel.*

2.3. Lust. Repression

Our protagonist, Mahoney Jr. lives in a puritan society where religion controls almost every aspect of daily life. Puritan morals reject sex overtly and regard it as something filthy or immoral. It is by no means surprising that the main character of the novel suffers from a very deep sexual repression. Let us focus on the following passage from chapter 5, in which Mahoney Jr. fantasizes about some girls and women from his community:

[...] Mary Moran's thighs working against the saddle of the bicycle as she came round by Kelly's of the Big Park with a can of milk, the whiteness and hairs of Mrs. Murphy's legs above the canvas shoes in the summer, and silk and all sorts of lace.

Parts of the female anatomy are bestowed salience, especially the thighs, that is, they are profiled against their immediate scope of the female body. The overall ambience of the excerpt evokes whiteness, light, fairness and softness. This is expressed by a number of coordinated nominals conveying meanings of this kind: *a can of milk, whiteness, silk, lace*.

The boy's inner conflict becomes apparent in the next extract from chapter 10. While he is considering the possibility of becoming a priest very seriously, he finds it hard to struggle against his sexual fantasies, to such an extent that he imagines being a priest and listening to a young girl in the confession box, admitting having illegitimate sex with an older man. He fantasizes about his chances of taking advantage of his position to make this girl have sex with him, though being a priest, which is almost a blasphemy:

The same young thighs that had opened submissively wide to the man's rise the summer's night by the river might open wide as that for you. She'd give you the fulfilment you craved. You'd have known pleasure before you died, it seemed a great deal to know. Bread might be marvellous in starvation, you'd find total meaning in devouring it for the time of hunger, but your hunger was for a woman, mirage of total marvel and everything in her flesh.

The fantasy girl is referred to metonymically, since only her thighs and her flesh are profiled. These windows of attention depict the girl as an object of sexual desire, which is at the same time metaphorically conceptualized as HUNGER, by the use of nouns and verbs within that dominion: *bread, starvation, devouring, hunger*.

Relations are also given prominence in the form of action clauses. Once again, Mahoney Jr. is the affected participant, the landmark. His lack of resolution, due to his sexual repression makes him the receiver of the action chains. The fantasy girl is the trajector, the one who takes the initiative. However, the unlikeliness of this daydream to become real is reflected on the use of epistemic modality: *might, would, would have known, it seemed*.

But perhaps the most representative instance of modality is the noun phrase *mirage of total marvel*, a clear example of dynamic modality which stands for the protagonist's mad sexual cravings, as he fantasizes about being given the chance to openly stare at the naked body of a woman.

However, his disproportionate sexual desire clashes with his irresolution and his inner conflict with religion in the next passages from chapter 10, where he imagines himself married to Mary Moran. Actions in the extract are epistemically modalized due to their improbability or the boy's inability to take a step forward:

She was gone and dream of her took over, Mary and you together, and married. With her, you'd walk a life as under the shade of trees, a life in a wild summer that'd last for ever.

But you couldn't even hold her purse, you took her into your mind a wet Saturday, excited her, put foul abuse in her mouth. Afterwards took the woolen sock that had soaked the seed and held it to the light.

[...]

You couldn't have Mary Moran if you went to be a priest and you couldn't be a priest as you were. The only way you could have her anyhow was as an old whore of your mind, and everything was growing fouled.

In fact, the only non-modal actions are those depicting the sad reality. Mary is gone and he is left to himself, his fantasies and masturbation. The clauses are direct and unambiguous: *She was gone, took the woolen sock that had soaked the seed.*

This inner conflict is reflected in the ambience of this passage: *an old whore of your mind, everything was growing fouled.*

In chapter 22, the reader is presented with a new feature in young Mahoney's character. He has finally abandoned the idea of becoming a priest and decided to go to university instead. He has eventually solved his inner conflict. This is one of the few times when we find the first person narrator, and that is due to the fact that it is young Mahoney speaking for himself, no alter ego, no split-self. He becomes the trajector of the action chains, and the *mirage girl* becomes the landmark, the affected participant. Actions are conveyed this time in the present simple, with hardly any modality, probably because the boy has freed himself from the religious obstacle and foresees the possibility of having a girlfriend:

A girl in the hay, breasts and lips and thighs, a heart-shaped locket swinging in the valley of her breasts, I'd catch it with the teeth, the gold hard but but warm from the flesh. The hay comes sharp against my skin once I get my trousers free. The miraged girl is in the hay, shaking hay in my eyes and hair, and she struggles and laughs as I catch her, and she yields "My love," and folds my lips in a kiss. I lay her bare under my hands, I slide into her, the pain of the pricking hay delicious pleasure.

"my love. My love. My love," I mutter, the lips roving on the hay, the seed pumping free, and it was over.

The passage is heavily loaded with sex, and desire. The atmosphere is construed by a number of sex-inspiring nominals, and the SEX dominion is activated: *breasts, lips, teeth, flesh, skin, my trousers, kiss, the pain of the pricking, pleasure*, and verbs: *struggles, laughs, yields, lay her bare, slide into her, roving on the hay*.

However, in chapter 29, young Mahoney's old insecurity returns and takes control of him. He can't gather the courage to take active part in the dance and mingle and socialize with the girls. Examples of epistemic modality expressing uncertainty and inability are abundant in the passage at the ballroom, but the most relevant feature is the return of the second person narrator, the split-self that makes the boy alienated from his immediate context. He becomes a *zero participant*, powerless to make a move, repressed by his family background, his inner fears, his own unhappiness. And this is a completely new perspective for the character. He does absolutely nothing, only stares at the scene before him. Even his split-self speaks to him aloud this time, McGahern uses inverted commas, and what is more, he answers his other self in the first person:

Because you couldn't dance.

Were you good-looking enough, would they look at you with revulsion?

Would you have the courage to ask a girl to dance?

Would you be the one leper in the hall at Ladies Choice [...]

"You can't face it," the nerves shivered

"No. No. I'm not able to face it. I'm sick. Another night it'll be easier."

The use of the imperative, impelling himself to calm down, and of conditional constructions reinforce the idea of insecurity:

“Control yourself. Control yourself. It’s not the end of the world. It’ll be forgotten by tomorrow morning,” but it was no use.

“If you don’t go to this dance it’ll be even harder the next time, you’ll never be able to go, you’ll never be able to take any natural part in life, get any natural fulfilment. You’ll be an oddity all your days”

As for ambience, the lively and cheerful atmosphere of the scene is meticulously construed by profiling the girls’ attire, makeup and anatomy through nouns and attributive adjectives: *naked shoulders of the women, glitter of jewellery on their throats, scent and mascara and the blood on their lips, the hiss or taffeta stretching across their thrusting thighs*. The tone, however, is subjectively construed giving salience to the boy’s gloomy mood. This is realized by process verbs: *plague, blood pounding, shivered, trembling, lose your soul*, and some nominals: *lavatory bowl, destructive kiss*

The protagonist is almost immobile, things happen around him, but he takes no part in it. Lack of movement is expressed by stance verbs: *sit, can’t face, stood*.

3. Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to apply some strategies and techniques which lie within the fields of Cognitive Stylistics and Cognitive Semantics to a 1965 portrait of the rural Irish society, John McGahern's *The Dark*.

The author, John McGahern, makes a deliberate manipulation of language both at a lexical and structural level. The main objective of the author is to make an overt, explicit and strong criticism on the social organization of Ireland in the mid 1960s. In particular, he focuses on the notion of PATRIARCHY as long as it implies a dramatically masculine organization of society. Another strong motif in this novel is the savage attack on the influential Catholic Church in Ireland, exposing its darkest and most shameful side. The sexual repression that typically goes along with puritanism also becomes apparent throughout the novel, and a latent sexual tension can be easily perceived as we read on.

McGahern employs the technique of foregrounding (or profiling, or attentional windowing) to get his message across. He profiles both entities, concepts (nominal grounding) and relations (clausal grounding):

a) In nominal grounding, he sets the objective atmosphere or the subjective tone of every passage by carefully selecting nominals with a certain semantic load, and by using adjectivals in attributive or predicative position, seeking an effect on the reader.

b) In clausal grounding, it is of paramount importance the extensive use of deontic modality (to express authority), epistemic modality (to express insecurity or uncertainty) and dynamic modality (especially when craving for sex). Conditional constructions reinforce the different kinds of modality. Passive constructions also play a relevant role when the intended effect is to shift the trajector.

The alternation of narrative voices (omniscient, first and second person narrators) shifts perspective and opens a new field of research for the present novel: split-selves.

4. Reference

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