

# Satire and Trauma in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract:*

*The Butcher Boy* (1992) is the third novel by Northern Irish author Patrick McCabe. It tells the story of 12-year-old Francie Brady and is set in the small town of Clones, in western County Monaghan, Ireland in the early 1960s. The town was badly hit economically by the partition of Ireland in 1921 because of its location on the border with County Fermanagh in Northern Ireland. *The Butcher Boy* emphasises the significant influence the instability of the community during the 1960s, a time of rapid change and ethnic and political violence, has on this dysfunctional Brady family. These political and economic circumstances are very relevant for our discussion because the Bradys, as part of this small community, suffer from some post-traumatic consequences derived from these circumstances, which affect their psychological state and identity in very negative terms. This paper focuses on how McCabe recreates Francie's post-traumatic effects of such a difficult childhood and upbringing through formal literary devices characteristic of both trauma fiction and satire rhetoric, and to what effect the Irish writer uses them.

*Keywords:* Childhood, Identity, Patrick McCabe, Rhetoric of satire, Trauma

## 1. Introduction

*The Butcher Boy* (1992) is the third novel of the Irish author Patrick McCabe. It tells the story of a young boy, Francie Brady, whose father Benny is a bitter alcoholic and whose mother, Annie, frequently abused both verbally

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and physically by her husband, often considers suicide, and is committed for a time to a mental hospital. *The Butcher Boy* is narrated by Francie himself and outlines the daily life of his dysfunctional family, so defined because it does not perform normally and has various members who behave or act outside social norms. The boy often retreats into a fantasy world and his imagination is fuelled by television – aliens, communists and the atomic age – which allows him to escape the reality of his abnormal family<sup>2</sup>. After his mother's death, Francie finds a job at the local abattoir, where he shows a flair for killing pigs. The end of the novel reveals how Francie's sense of identity has shifted, affected by his fantasies and the daily, frequently violent, experiences in his dysfunctional family: he has drifted from being a manic fantasist to a murderer who kills his neighbour Mrs Nugent as if she were another pig in his slaughterhouse<sup>3</sup>.

*The Butcher Boy* is set in a barely concealed version of the small town of Clones, McCabe's home town in western County Monaghan, in the early 1960s. During his childhood there, McCabe was witness to the region's rapid modernization and internationalization, and the novel reflects the upheaval of this social and political transition. County Monaghan, part of the Border Region, was badly hit economically by the partition of Ireland in 1921 because of its location and was earmarked for economic development by the Irish government. The creation of the border left Clones with no railway at all and deprived it of access to a large part of its economic hinterland for many years. McCabe himself has stated that: "the world that I write about, which is a world of noise and clamour and excitement... an interacting community... The families were huge, and they couldn't afford to feed them because they were poor. So the kids were out all day every day, and you know, wearing shoddy enough clothes. But they were tremendously vital" (Lebargy 2013, 135). Francie and his friend Joe are two of these tremendously vital children. *The Butcher Boy* emphasizes the significant influence of the instability of the 1960s, a time of rapid change and ethnic and political violence, on the dysfunctional Brady family living in a society hidden or ignored by the official image of Ireland presented by the media and the government<sup>4</sup>:

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the aforementioned television programmes, the specific historical references to North American television, Hollywood "B" films and the Cuban Missile Crisis that appear in the novel also affect Francie's sense of identity, shifting from being a normal boy to feeling somehow influenced by all these examples of violence from outside.

<sup>3</sup> Francie's parents, however, seek to forsake their environment not only through mental alienation, but by aspiring to an existence no longer controlled by external conditions, an existence situated in imaginary or unconventional locations appropriate to their eccentric temperaments. This is why Benny is constantly drunk or playing the trumpet and Annie frequently visits a mental hospital.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the term "dysfunctional family" in this context, see Jeffers 2002, 151 and Praga 2016, 101.

*The Butcher Boy* is a novel that depicts the *other Ireland*, an Ireland of hidden memories, damaged childhoods and destroyed psyches very far away from the Valera's cosy homestead, contests of athletic youths and laughter of comedy maidens ... Violence runs through the novel from beginning to end, under the mask of loneliness, alcoholism, murder, marginality or homelessness, perhaps the most powerful feeling of the story, and an ill luck the characters seem to inherit. It is not surprising that the word "home" is something unattainable for the Brady's in a period of Ireland in which cosy homesteads were bastions of moral purity, places where the children of the nation would be cherished and nourished. Home, in *The Butcher Boy*, however, becomes a thoroughly pathologized site. (Praga 2016, 101)

To my mind, all this political, social and economic turmoil are the direct cause of the apparently post-traumatic disorders presented by the main characters of McCabe's novel, affecting their psychological state and identity in very negative terms. The following study of *The Butcher Boy* focuses on how McCabe presents the effects of traumatic childhood through formal literary devices characteristic of both trauma fiction and satirical rhetoric, and on the aspects of Irish society thus criticized. Here is an example of the ways in which the aforementioned post-traumatic effects are formally translated into the novel:

Something else broke crockery or something and then ma was crying: Don't blame me because you [Francie's father] can't face the truth about yourself, any chances you had you drank them away! ... But it wasn't all over and when I [Francie] stopped listening to the cars I'd hear him: God's curse the fucking day I ever set eyes on you! The next day ... her face was red and patchy and hot like she'd been sitting bent over the fire only there was no fire. (McCabe 1992, 6-7)

Here, McCabe's novel mirrors the daily lives of this dysfunctional family at a formal level by using third- and first-person narrative and stream of consciousness with little punctuation and no separation of dialogue and thought. Regarding satirical rhetoric, *The Butcher Boy* emerged in the early 1990s, a decade that witnessed a distinct shift in Ireland's willingness to face its past. Although traditionally silent when confronted with controversial social problems, Ireland began to "speak out" in the 1990s with a new openness that was most evident in controversies given broad coverage in the media – particularly those focusing attention on the suffering of children and other marginalized citizens. The 1990 election of Mary Robinson as President was pivotal to this transformation, for it symbolized a hunger for change and a consequent renegotiation of Irish identity. People began to question the government, institutions, and social attitudes, and did so persistently, as they had never done before. McCabe's narrator's uses a particular rhetorical strategy of the satirical apparatus – irony – to question the British Crown's neglect of Clones and of Ireland as a whole:

The fountain wasn't frozen it was spraying away goodo on the Diamond so I sat down beside it for a while. There was one thing I knew about that fountain. They had put it there for Queen Victoria the same time they built the Jubilee Road in honour of her visit to the town that year. Except for one thing – she never came. (McCabe 1992, 103)

Another issue relevant to the novel is the fact that, from the 1990s onwards, the Irish began to question the Catholic Church and its significant historical influence on the Irish state, which was institutionalized after the Republic of Ireland's independence. In *The Butcher Boy*, McCabe draws the reader's attention to one particular issue: priests' molestation of children in "industrial schools" run by the Church. During the course of his internment, Francie is molested by one of the priests, who asks him to dress up as a girl:

Sit up here now, he says and took me on his knee ...

I could hear Tiddly rooting about behind the big armchair and the crackling paper of a parcel. His fingers were all over the place as he fumbled with the twine and tried to open it.

Let me, I said.

O, said Tiddly.

Tiddly's eyes were the size of jam pot lids. I swooned.

O father it's lovely!

It was a woman's bonnet with a long white ribbon dangling down.

I felt like laughing my arse off but poor old Tiddly wouldn't have liked that biting away at the skin of his mouth oh Francis.

... He puts his arm around me you've no idea how much I love you Francis he says in the nights I even dream about you. I want to know everything about you.

... I don't like you any more Tiddly.

... He [Bubble, another priest] said Father Sullivan was a good man. I said nothing.

... But he didn't have to worry about that. As long as he left me alone and minded his own business I wouldn't say anything about old Father Big-Mickey I mean Tiddly. Now he was gone I didn't give a fuck. (*Ibidem*, 89-95)

This transgressive act, reported in ludicrously grotesque terms, reveals a regime that was crude and bestial, and was hidden by the Catholic authorities. In writing about this serious and controversial issue using formal devices to depict trauma – including fragmentation, dislocation, and repetition – and rhetorical strategies, such as irony and wit, McCabe gives Ireland's silenced children a voice, through Francie.

McCabe's story shows how the demonization of marginalized citizens, like Francie and his parents in this small community, can take root inside a child. Francie suffers certain traumatic consequences of such demonization, manifested in a sense of betrayal and self-loathing. These feelings are very strong in him because he and his family are removed from their community.

In fact, what they hate most is being different from the other members of their community, since difference brings about abuse and cruelty. *The Butcher Boy* shows how this sense of alienation and external abuse affects a young child, driving him to violence, crime, and, ultimately, insanity.

In my view, McCabe's novel makes a case for the damaging internalization of certain assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze in one of the most vulnerable members of society: a child<sup>5</sup>. Francie sets up a struggle with the narrow community in which he lives, embodied by Mrs Nugent and her son Phillip, who are viewed as complicit with the outside gaze. Francie dwells upon this:

I was thinking about Mrs Nugent standing there crying her eyes out. I said sure what's the use in crying now Nugent it was you caused all the trouble if you hadn't poked your nose in everything would have been all right ... *She said she knew the kind of us long before she went to England* and she might have known not to let her son anywhere near the likes of me what else would you expect from a house where the father's never in, lying about the pubs from morning to night, he's no better than a pig. You needn't think we don't know what goes on in this house oh we know all right! Small wonder the boy is the way he is what chance has he got running about the town at all hours and the clothes hanging off him it doesn't take money to dress a child God love him it's not his fault but if he's seen near our Philip again there'll be trouble. There'll be trouble now mark my words!

After that ma took my part and the last thing I heard was Nugent going down the lane and calling back *Pigs - sure the whole town knows that!* (McCabe 1992, 2-4; my emphasis)

Francie's patterns of behaviour and relationships with other characters like the Nugents are distorted in form and meaning, and reveal that Francie does not feel part of the larger community, effectively turning him into "the Other". Here, *The Butcher Boy* deals with recurrent themes like identity and religion, and the traumatic consequences for Irish children of a period of rapid change and ethnic and political violence. The quotation above is relevant from a formal perspective because the use of the term "pig" is an example of satirical rhetoric, that is, the animalization of human beings. As Scarlata notes, "The epithet of 'pig,' recalling a long English tradition of cruel anti-Irish caricatures, sticks to Francie for the rest of the story, often as a marker of difference between his family and the Nugents" (2005, 234). Thus the term "pig" hints at the fact that, during the Troubles – the ethno-nationalist

<sup>5</sup> Due to the novel's concern for Francie and his danger of being forgotten by institutions, and by Irish society at large, *The Butcher Boy* shares many aspects with Pier Paolo Pasolini's novel *The Street Kids* (1955) and corroborates some of the ideas on "social determinism" discussed by the latter in his social writing. I wish to express my gratitude to one of the referees for their detailed revision and suggestions here.

conflict in the North of Ireland that began in 1968 and ended with the Belfast “Good Friday” Agreement of 1998 – the gaze from outside was identified with the English gaze. The above quotation shows McCabe’s interest in tackling the issue of the relationship between the two types of community living in the Border Region: that formed mostly by Protestants, who consider themselves British or identify more with the British, and that mostly comprising Catholics who consider themselves Irish, like the Bradys. Although the association between the Nugents and England is pervasive in the novel, it is only part of Francie’s distorted projection. This does not mean that the Nugents themselves feel linked to the United Kingdom<sup>6</sup>. The fact that Mrs Nugent’s statement, “*Pigs – sure the whole town knows that!*” is in italics makes me think that Francie’s imagination is at work here again.

At this point, it would be interesting to comment on the relevance of the chosen theoretical tools. According to Whitehead, “The rise of trauma theory ... has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to *how* and *why* it is remembered. This raises, in turn, the related issues of politics, ethics and aesthetics” (2004, 3; my emphasis). Whitehead argues further that: “Trauma fiction relies on ... a number of key stylistic features” as modes of reflection or critique (*ibidem*, 84). In this regard, McCabe conceptualizes traumatic experiences and represents them in *The Butcher Boy* through a self-conscious deployment of repetition (at the levels of language, imagery, and plot) and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice because the language needed to describe the traumatic effects of violence and abuse in 1960s Ireland is not available to a child like Francie.

Besides these formal devices, McCabe also deploys several methods of the rhetoric of satire in his novel. According to Clark, McCabe is a “dark satirist” with a “modern interest in the psyche, in man’s troublous inner life” (1991, 7). This interest would lead him “to exaggerate the dark side of human nature, to shock the audience with scenes of the startling, the disturbing, the unnatural, and the absurd”. Some of the devices McCabe uses “to cripple[e] and unhinge[e] his literary form” (*ibidem*, 103) are fantasy, detachment, dystopia, and scatology. Such “darkling artistry”, Clark continues, “cannot help but alienate its audience and upset the bourgeoisie; indeed, it is thus that the traditional satiric artist, treating serious subjects, gains serious attention” (*ibidem*, 7). The excerpt I have just analysed serves as an example of “double-voicedness” (Vice 1997, 45), which refers to “the presence of two distinct voices in one utterance” - that of the character who is speaking, and the indirect intention of the author. As shall be explained later, all these aspects transform the work under discussion into an example of satirical or “dialogical” (Holquist 1990, 181) discourse.

<sup>6</sup> As one referee of this essay rightly pointed out, “On the contrary, their home furniture, traditional food and music are often ridiculed by the narrative voice as Kitsch Irish”.

In what follows, I shall explore how McCabe draws on all these methods of depicting trauma and satirical criticism of people and institutions by using a veil of indirection in *The Butcher Boy*. In doing so, I shall clarify the ways in which McCabe mirrors at a formal level certain post-traumatic effects derived from living in a dysfunctional family in a violent atmosphere in one of the most vulnerable members of society, and to what effect the writer does so.

## 2. *Methods of depicting trauma and the rhetoric of satire in The Butcher Boy*

In a very insightful essay, Patten argues that the period from the 1950s to the 1970s saw novelists put particular emphasis on historical revision in their fiction, and which “had clear affinities, too, with Ireland’s ongoing political process of enquiry” (2006, 263). Within this context, novelists like Patrick McCabe, who were born during this period “in which Ireland experienced most acutely the effects of the country’s failure to keep pace with modernisation and secularisation” (*ibidem*, 263-264), put intense effort into “chronicling the insecurity of this period”<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, *The Butcher Boy* “depicts the pressures outlined above in terms of communal crisis and individual psychosis” (*ibidem*, 264) and, thus, Francie embodies “the repression and claustrophobia of Irish life, ... [he is] driven by the desire to reach beyond it to alternative identities derived from popular music, comic books, cinema and television. His novels convey the trauma of fractured or incomplete historical transition” (*ibidem*, 264). This might explain why Francie’s behaviour towards Mrs Nugent is violent throughout the novel. He considers her responsible for the fragmentation of his family and, by extension, for all that is rotten in the small town of Clones, which is Francie’s whole world. The quotation below shows how Francie’s post-traumatic disorders have their origin in Mrs Nugent’s behaviour in general, as a representative of the outside world. She acts as a catalyst for Francie’s descent into madness:

Mrs Nugent ... lay into ma about the comics and the whole lot and I could hear ma saying *yes yes I know I will of course!* and I was waiting for her to come flying up the stairs, get me by the ear and throw me on the step in front of Nugent and that’s what she would have done if Nugent hadn’t started on about the pigs. (McCabe 1992, 4)

Francie and Joe offer to return the comics they have stolen from Mrs Nugent’s son, Philip, but she does not listen. She interferes constantly in her child’s affairs. From that moment on, Francie sets himself at war with Philip’s mother

<sup>7</sup> Film director Neil Jordan, who adapted *The Butcher Boy* into a feature film of the same name in 1997, acknowledged in an interview conducted by McCabe that he “experienced the world of *The Butcher Boy*” (McCabe 2015, 238).

for putting her nose into his family's business. When the first-person narrator claims, "She said she knew the kind of us long before she went to England", this link to England appears to explain her patronizing attitude towards the Brady family; she considers it to give her the right to be judgemental - an attitude adopted by neighbouring countries following the partition of Ireland.

As the excerpt above shows, Francie's conflicting psychological states can be observed not only in his distorted patterns of conduct and interaction, but also in the language he uses. His discourse presents the impact of all these traumatic experiences by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse and the narrative is characterized by repetition and indirection:

I'll bet you never heard a record as good as this Francie she says. What's it called ma I says its called The Butcher Boy she says come on and we'll dance. ... We'll stop now ma I said but away we went again.

I wish my baby it was born  
 And smiling on its daddy's knee  
 And me poor girl to be dead and gone  
 With the long green grass growing over me.  
 He went upstairs and the door he broke  
 He found her hanging from a rope  
 He took his knife and he cut her down  
 And in her pocket these words he found  
 Oh make my grave large wide and deep  
 Put a marble stone at my head and feet  
 And in the middle a turtle dove  
 That the world may know that I died for love.

It was a good song but I didn't know what was going on in it. When it was over she says what do you think of that Francie - he went upstairs and the door he broke he found her hanging from a rope! He wasn't so smart then the butcher boy was he. She starts telling me all about it but I didn't want to hear any more. (McCabe 1992, 19)

Francie and his parents act out their predicament in a continuous quarrel, by means of an indirect use of words. Francie and his parents' dysfunctional lives show the alienating effects of external abuse and social constraints in tragicomic and, sometimes, absurdist terms. The passage above expresses nostalgia, sadness, anxiety, anguish, and a sense of fear and helplessness by means of a hybrid of first-person narrative and stream of consciousness with minimal punctuation and no separation of dialogue and thought. In examining the state of identity in the novel, Gauthier observes that: "The reader is constantly reassessing Francie Brady's psychological instability and is never quite sure to what extent Francie's perceptions are delusions or are incisive commentary on the narrow community in which he lives" (2003, 197).



Besides these literary devices, McCabe also uses other techniques to shape post-traumatic disorder. He deploys several rhetorical devices of satire, such as fantasy and detachment, yet also dystopian imagery (Clark 1991, 139-147) and “scatology” (*ibidem*, 116-130). McCabe conducts his satirical attack by incorporating such devices and, in doing so, undertakes an indirect critique of politics and institutions, including literary convention. He achieves detachment through fantasy and this rhetorical device allows him to downgrade the reader’s perception of reality in *The Butcher Boy*. Below is the moment in which Francie enters Mrs Nugent’s house without permission and imagines that she and her son Philip are pigs and their house is a farmyard:

When I finished my snack I went upstairs to see if I could find Philip’s room. No problem ... I found a lipstick in one of the drawers and I wrote in big letters across the wallpaper PHILIP IS A PIG ... Mrs Nugent. Its [*sic*] your responsibility as a sow to see that Philip behaves as a good pig should. I’m leaving it up to you. She nodded ... I am a pig said Philip. I am a sow said Mrs Nooge. Just to recap then I said. What do pigs do? They eat pig nuts said Philip. ... No, I said, the answer I’m looking for is - *they do poo!* ... Right come on up here Philip and show the class. ... At first Mrs Nugent was shy about what he was doing but when she saw the great effort he was making she said she was proud of him. And so you should be I said. Harder, Philip, harder!

He went at it then for all he was worth and then there it sat proud as punch on the carpet of the bedroom, the best poo ever ... Well done, Philip, I cried, you did it! ... Now its [*sic*] time for Mrs Nugent to show us how well she can perform. Can she poo as well as her son Philip? ... but I’m afraid that wasn’t what happened at all. (*Ibidem*, 61-63)

McCabe turns to a series of strategies to present the Nugents as though they were pigs, mere caricatures, by using fantasy, exaggeration, and distortion. The narrator uses caricature and animal imagery to undermine the dignity of his victims, and uses repetition of the word “pig” to articulate his scorn. In doing so, McCabe represents a violent “gaze” which makes of Francie the victim of the social disturbances of the writer’s childhood.

With regard to caricature, the physical particularities or defects of Mrs Nugent and Francie’s relatives are exaggerated for critical purposes. Benny Brady’s fondness for pilchards is pushed to grotesque extremes:

Da ate pilchards when he went on a skite. The flies were buzzing round them. There was curdled milk and books thrown round all over the place and stuff pulled out of the cupboards ... da was standing there staring at me. There were red circles round his eyes and I could smell him. *You*, was all he said. I didn’t know what he meant. But he told me. He meant *you* did it, what happened to ma. I says what are you talking about what happened to ma. (*Ibidem*, 42-43)

Benny is portrayed in a very negative manner through McCabe’s use of caricature. However, the reductive tendency of McCabe’s satire is also

achieved through other means: the comparison of characters (the Nugents and Francie) with animals like pigs, the animalization of human beings, and the use of scatology. Take as an example the moment in which Francie is caught having defecated on Mrs Nugent's carpet as if he were a pig. McCabe seems to delight most in the filthiest and most disgusting scenes in *The Butcher Boy*. He repeatedly introduces scatological, excremental, and grotesque details and places both Francie and Mrs Nugent in the most embarrassing situations. O'Mahony rather coyly describes *The Butcher Boy* "as an arena for burlesque humour and biting satire" (2003). McCabe the satirist places people in indecent situations and expresses an utter delight in them. In doing so, he uncovers our – or, more specifically, Ireland's – silenced fears and pains, and makes them public. Mr Nugent shouts at Francie: "This time I'll see to it you're put where you belong. And you'll clean up that before you leave here with the police and the walls too for my wife's not going to do it" (McCabe 1992, 63). It is at this point that Francie gives up his fantasies and reality hits him hard.

As observed, McCabe, as satirist, surveys general and specific social behaviours in order to articulate an attack upon the vices and follies that derive from them. Scatology, as a rhetorical technique, amplifies the impact of the satirist's denunciation by means of disparaging and denigrating the dignity of the human condition. This is why scatology takes for comparison the trivial, or worse, the ugly and repulsive, like the figure of the pig or else Benny's passion for pilchards.

The attribution of animal features to human beings has always been a means of expressing humour, scorn, and degradation, as other Irish authors like Jonathan Swift and Flann O'Brien have shown in their novels. This rhetorical strategy questions the superiority of the human race and presents a grotesque image of our most cherished values and codes. It is connected with questions of indirection and irony. Thus, Francie's parents and he himself are addressed as pigs, which Francie does not like. But, later, he seems to be happy to be associated with the pig, as, for example, when he asks Mrs Nugent to pay the pig poll tax and calls himself "Francie Pig the Toll Tax Man" (*ibidem*, 13). The Irish child puts himself in the most embarrassing situations only to hide the attack behind a veil of apparent incongruity. Here, animals like pigs are shown to make the same mistakes and show the same pettiness as human beings. In this way, McCabe favours indirection to the detriment of explicitness and direct confrontation. By using fantasy and animal imagery, McCabe the satirist dissimulates his subjective judgements beneath an image of pretended objectivity and impartiality. In doing so, he indirectly condemns child abuse in Ireland during the Troubles.

Besides scatology, Francie also dreams of children's television series, science fiction films, games of cowboys and Indians, etc. There is sustained reference to these dreams throughout *The Butcher Boy*. Fantasy is deployed in a

sustained manner and the story that results will be clear to the reader already familiar with the sources on which McCabe draws. Francie alludes to other texts: "Your man comes at Green Lantern I says. Next thing bam! A big giant hammer comes flying out of his ring and splatters him. And that's only Green Lantern. There's far more than him that could do even better things than that!" (*ibidem*, 47). Francie's fantasies fuelled by comics about cowboys and Indians help him create his own imaginary existence in Clones, transcend the disturbing experience of acknowledging his family conflicts, and cope with the external restrictions imposed upon him. By means of these peculiar narrative devices, McCabe has the internally divided Francie use not only action, but also the energy of his mind to express his condition as an Irish child in the Border Region in the 1960s.

Ideological changes cause utopian preconceptions to collapse, and so, anti-utopian or dystopian narratives arise. This is due to the great influence of the technological and scientific revolution Europe experienced in the 1960s. Generally speaking, all these changes had a very positive popular reception, which may be why all the aforementioned references are so cherished by Francie.

It may be the case that McCabe views such scientific progress and the advent of capitalism and American culture less positively than most Irish; perhaps this is one of the reasons why he depicts them in a particularly sinister manner in *The Butcher Boy*, a very dark fiction. The novel contains many elements of dystopian fiction that are absorbed by Francie from television – aliens, communists and the atomic age – until his father breaks it into pieces. Dystopia reflects the horrors of war or socio-economic crisis. In this sense, *The Butcher Boy* is an example of literary dystopia that feeds on the reality of Ireland in the 1960s and its actual experiences, such as priestly child abuse or small communities like Clones abusing certain outlying members like the Brady family. In this way, McCabe constructs an outlandish world, one of metaphysical anguish for a child, like Francie, provoked by all the external restrictions imposed upon his being.

Obviously, readers recognize that science fiction stories are unreachable and improbable scenarios. With the intergalactic wars, lunar settlements, and extra-terrestrial contacts of science fiction that feature in Francie's inner world, McCabe situates the child in a clear dystopic setting where he is the victim of his parents' violence, a notable lack of parental skills, and alienation from his community. Francie's goal is to achieve autonomy outside his small world, and to transcend his suffocating routine in the small town of Clones. This is why he runs away to Dublin, where he feels much more at ease.

Francie rebels against the institutional machinery of his time because he does not feel comfortable with the Catholic ruling class. McCabe constructs an eccentric character who is willing to perform an extreme type of subversion or resistance to social conformity in its strangeness and rejects the

conventional desires for wealth, power, education, and fame. The outcome is an experimental novel that mirrors at the formal level the dilemmas of Irish children in the Border Region during the 1960s.

To my mind, McCabe creates the figure of Francie to represent “the other” or “others” on the stage of the public square of Clones. By laughing at himself and at others throughout the novel, Francie reveals ideological constructions – of religion, for example – and human relationships as false, because they are formed/deformed by the unhealthy social situation of Ireland. In line with Kristeva’s notion of “carnival” (1980), McCabe is carrying out a carnivalesque and subversive negation of the official culture of his time in Clones<sup>8</sup>. To achieve this, Francie is made to enact repetitive tragicomic situations in the public space using fantasy, like his going to the fountain which was specifically built for the English queen. The experience of traumatic situations and the conflictual relationships between Francie and his own imagination, and between the community of Clones and the Brady family represent the relationship between the British on the border and the Irish inhabitants of Clones.

Having said that, children resort to using different strategies to cope with the effects of traumatic experiences and circumstances<sup>9</sup>. When Francie was younger, he would go back to an earlier period of his life and hallucinate or dream of being breastfed by Mrs Nugent:

Mrs Nugent was standing over me. Yes, Philip, she said. I know that. I’ve known it for a long time. Then slowly she unbuttoned her blouse and took out her breast. Then she said: This is for you Francis. She put her hand behind my head and firmly pressed my face forward. (McCabe 1992, 60)

As the story evolves, however, Francie becomes more nihilistic. He loses his parents’ company and that of his best friend Joe. Francie cannot find positive ways to compensate for these losses and starts to rebel against his small community and to conduct himself in distorted ways. This partly explains, for example, why he keeps his father’s corpse on the sofa of his living room, why he consumes alcohol, and why he behaves eccentrically, wildly, and rudely in front of his neighbours. In order to cure his conflictual psychological state, which is due to a lack of self-worth and self-esteem, it would have been more appropriate to teach Francie’s father parental skills, than to send Francie to a Church-run home for wayward boys. In fact, this is where

<sup>8</sup> On the “carnival” aspects of McCabe’s novel, see Scarlata 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Although McCabe is best known for his mostly violent and darkly humorous novels set in contemporary Ireland, such as *The Dead School* (1995), *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), or *Emerald Germs of Ireland* (2001), he has also written books for children, like *The Adventures of Shay Mouse* (1985).

Benny was forced to go by his parents when he was younger, which affected his own psychological stability to a great extent. Francie's new situation in the home is terrible because, far from helping him to achieve stability, he is subjected to physical abuse by certain dictatorial teachers. By the time the aforementioned molestation occurs in the novel, Francie has already re-evaluated his relationship with the Catholic Church and forces one of the main religious representatives of the youth home to let him go or he "might talk".

Psychology studies<sup>10</sup> reveal that accepting traumatic experiences has more positive long-term consequences than rejecting them. But when one is just a child, like Francie, one tries to avoid pain by all means. This is why Francie is at ease playing at cowboys and Indians with his blood brother Joe. He is most happy in Dublin, away from home, far from his community, or working in the abattoir, the only place where he feels he has a purpose in life and where his work is valued and acknowledged.

McCabe seems not to be concerned about whether Francie's actions are right or wrong. Like many children and young people who experienced the Troubles, Francie becomes very negatively influenced by external forces and community prejudices. *The Butcher Boy* reveals the consequences of post-traumatic disorders when Francie makes himself noticed in public. This trauma is why he constantly makes a fool of himself in front of his neighbours and claims to witness apparitions of the Virgin Mary. Moreover, when one is as young as Francie, one does not consider the consequences of one's actions. Perhaps the most extreme example of the animalization of human beings in *The Butcher Boy* occurs when Francie returns home and resumes his job at the butcher's. One day, while on his rounds, he calls at the Nugents' house. Mrs Nugent answers and Francie forces his way in:

I started to shake and kicked her I don't know how many times. She groaned and said I didn't care if she groaned or said please or what she said. I caught her round the neck and I said: You did two bad things Mrs Nugent. She didn't answer I didn't want to hear any answer. I smacked her against the wall a few times there was a smear of blood at the corner of her mouth and her hand was reaching out trying to touch me when I cocked the captive bolt. I lifted her off the floor with one hand and shot the bolt right into her head *thblok* was the sound it made, like a goldfish dropping into a bowl. If you ask anyone how you kill a pig they will tell you cut its throat across but you don't you do it long ways. Then she just lay there with her chin sticking up and I opened her then I stuck my hand in her stomach and wrote PIGS all over the walls of the upstairs room. (McCabe 1992, 195)

In this harsh description of Francie's assassination of Mrs Nugent, his attribution of porcine features to her is a source of dark humour, scorn, and

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see Thorne and McLean 2002.

degradation. “She groaned”, because pigs groan, in surrender and annoyance. This rhetorical device, the use of animal imagery, aims to question the superiority of this woman whose visit to England led her to adopt a patronizing attitude towards the Brady family and present a grotesque image of her British values and codes. McCabe’s use of devices such as fantasy and animal imagery in the extract above is intended to hide the attack behind a veil of apparent incongruity. Here, the narrator, as a satirist, feels at ease because his attacks upon specific people like Mrs Nugent, or the British institutions she stands for, are veiled by this animal façade. A key issue for this satiric narrator is that he gains indirection to the detriment of explicitness and direct confrontation. In doing so, this fantasy passage indirectly contributes to highlighting the sense of detachment which satire conveys.

After this terrible scene, Francie puts Mrs Nugent into the cart with which he transports offal and meat waste, covering her body with it. Throughout the book, Francie holds Mrs Nugent to responsible for the fragmentation of his family, his separation from his friend Joe, and, by extension, all that is rotten in his small world. In assassinating Mrs Nugent, Francie feels liberated from the source of his pain.

Francie is not a traditional character, but the embodiment of conflicting psychological states. In an attempt to negate Mrs Nugent’s existence, Francie butchers and buries her under the abattoir offal. Since, as Wooden (2016) notes, “Professing belief in the resurrection of the dead and affirming that the human body is an essential part of a person’s identity, the Catholic Church insists that the bodies of the deceased be treated with respect and laid to rest in a consecrated place”, what Francie does to Mrs Nugent’s body is the negation of her identity. Francie is thus able to renegotiate this doctrine and his own existence. This may be why he casually resumes his rounds and makes his way back to the abattoir, where he is apprehended by the police. Francie’s mischievous nature makes him lead the police on a wild goose chase in the search for Mrs Nugent’s body, and to escape for a time, but he is recaptured and eventually imprisoned after revealing the whereabouts of her dismembered corpse. At the end of the book, Francie builds up an imaginative life of his own, first as a holy Irish boy and then as a butcher boy. Inspired by the protagonists of the comics he reads and his television heroes, Francie creates a fictional existence in Clones, transcends the traumatic experience of acknowledging his loneliness, and copes with the external restrictions imposed upon him in 1960s Ireland. This is the reason why Francie spends his time playing with water in a public fountain that was built long ago in honour of an English queen who never visited, why he imagines that he is a comic-book hero, and claims to witness apparitions of the Virgin Mary:

One day Bubble took me up to his study and said to me: I’m glad you’re learning manners.

Yes Father, I said.

... but I wasn't listening to a word he said ... After that they put me serving Mass. What a laugh that was ... It was around that time I started the long walks and the holy voices. Bubble says to me what are you doing going on all these long walks down to the low field by yourself? I told him I thought Our Lady was talking to me. I read that in a book about this holy Italian boy ... I knelt on the soggy turn for penance ... She had a rosary entwined around her pearly white hands and she said that it gladdened her that I had chosen to be good. I said no problem, Our Lady. (McCabe 1992, 75-77)

Here, Francie sets up a dialogue with the Virgin Mary<sup>11</sup> that is respectful towards her, but mocking towards the priest who molests him. The last two quotations examined reveal that Francie ridicules not only the English gaze, but also the Irish Catholic gaze. He is a child hero who spends his time contemplating, playing with the few objects he possesses (knives, a bolt gun, a cart, etc.), and builds up a fantasy life as a butcher boy. His double-voiced discourse and the verbal absurdity of the dialogues in which he engages the other characters undermine his post-traumatic disorder, which is based on a fixed social status in this Irish setting. Francie becomes a genuine creator of fiction. He decides his own ending while acting out on the stage of the public square, which constitutes a reflexive affirmation of being: the fiction that Francie creates in his own story.

Unlike Francie, who is immortal in his own head because his fantastic possibilities are endless, his parents are mortal, since they are stuck in the real world and die there. They contain the hope of redemption, yet the suffering of Francie is infinite in its absurdity. Francie's mother and father see death as an alternative that can end both physical and mental distress. Francie's mother, who is tied to her husband, feels that she has been divested of her identity and suffered a lifetime of betrayal. She is unable to cope with the life that has been imposed upon her by her society. I agree with McWilliams when she writes:

Women in McCabe's novels emerge as victims of a national tyranny whereby the national is always assumed to be feminine and is made to bear the burden of imposed meanings - for McCabe, true liberation lies in the breaking down of the familial, religious, and cultural orthodoxies of Irish national identity preserved and perpetuated in such images. (2010, 399)

This might explain why, when Francie leaves home, his mother can no longer cope with her situation at home and commits suicide. Francie's father, unable to bear her loss, drinks himself to death.

<sup>11</sup> Singer Sinéad O'Connor's performance as Francie's hallucination of the Virgin Mary in Jordan's film adaptation is significant given O'Connor's outspokenness about child abuse in Ireland and her own use of this metaphor in her song "Famine": "I see the Irish as a race / that's like a child that got itself bashed in the face". For further discussion, see Cullingford 2002.

Further evidence of Francie's post-traumatic disorder is his penchant for changing names. The importance of names as a means of representing identity and individuality is of crucial importance in *The Butcher Boy*. Here the processes of naming and renaming serve as a strategy to reveal the extreme invisibility of the experiences of children living in dysfunctional families, as was commonplace in Ireland during this period. The main characters are defined by the ecclesiastical discourse as pigs and degenerates, that is, as examples of a moral transgression that threatens the purity and sanctity of the nation. For example, Francie's father's alcohol consumption and his mother's madness and depressive character are conceptualized as an unnameable reality that has to be left out of History. Francie's change of name means that he can no longer be identified as a member of the Brady family in censorious Catholic Ireland: he calls himself Francie, then "pig", and, at the end of the novel, "Mr Carruthers". This last name implies that he no longer wishes to be associated with the Bradys. In this way, Francie's individual identity is annihilated: he becomes known to others as "pig" and, finally, as "the butcher boy". In calling him and his parents "pigs", Francie's neighbours deprive them of their identity. When Francie adopts the name Carruthers on his first visit to Dublin and, later, after his parents die, he changes his name again, for "the butcher boy", and forces himself to break with his past life.

The psychology literature shows that a person suffering a post-traumatic disorder needs to be valued by his community in order to recover and, thus, gain a positive view of life and other people<sup>12</sup>. Francie does not receive support either from his parents or his neighbours. He is the scapegoat of his community. When he becomes an orphan, he tells his father's doctor about the times he was molested in a youth home, but the doctor ignores his emotions and needs. When Francie goes to Joe's boarding school in County Donegal, he conducts himself in a grotesque manner as a means to draw attention to his lack of self-worth and self-esteem, yet he is rejected there too. Francie is in desperate need of empathy from his community and from Joe, but all these characters prioritize their own need "to survive" in this religious educational environment. Joe's own "survival" is thus more important than his sense of solidarity with his friend. Francie receives no support from his community, who turn their backs on him, and his psychological state worsens considerably, and rapidly, until he commits murder.

As observed, Francie goes through continuous invalidation of his identity, yet he remains resilient and opens his eyes to the harsh reality. At the beginning of the novel, when he escapes from his family and his small-town community to Dublin, and calls himself Carruthers (McCabe 1992, 19-20), Francie rediscovers his identity through re-founding it: "I am Mr Carruthers". This act of self-affirmation marks the end of his journey from unconditional acceptance of the Catholic doctrine and its degrading conceptualization of dysfunctional

<sup>12</sup> On this point, see Folkman *et al.* 1986.



families to the definition of his own self and the renegotiation of his Catholic identity. However, the wounds are too deep to forget and the end of this journey will not be the end of his pain. The narration of *The Butcher Boy* does not allow the reader to forget the devastating power of this boy's experiences, even when he manages to escape them or both geographically in space and in his own head.

Because of the black comic tone, the narration does not present Francie as a victim. He is a child victimized by a social, political, and religious system that exploits, annihilates, and silences him, but he is a survivor. Despite his terrible experiences and the subsequent bereavement, pain, and psychological effects of molestation on a young child who has already been the scapegoat for dysfunctional parental and community conduct, Francie is resilient and manages to escape. Since the publication of the novel, other storytellers have made the voices of Irish children heard through fiction and film - for example, Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) or Evelyn Conlon's novel *Not the Same Sky* (2013). *The Butcher Boy* is a book of denunciation, but also an exercise of memory acknowledging the hundreds of thousands of Irish children who have been either forgotten or silenced by Ireland's official History. By naming Francie's reality and transmitting his silenced experiences, *The Butcher Boy* openly challenges not only the official image of Irish childhood, but also the official history of Ireland.

### 3. Conclusions

This article has examined the relevance of various key stylistic devices that stand out most prominently in fiction dealing with traumatic situations and which are used in very specific ways in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*. More specifically, I have investigated the role of repetition (of language, imagery, and plot), and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice as major mechanisms giving voice to traumatic experiences in the novel. McCabe takes the story to its extreme possibilities, presenting a drama of conflict, murder, and suicide. In doing so, he conceptualizes and represents the effects of traumatic experiences on Francie's sense of identity, mimicking its symptomatology at a formal level: "*The Butcher Boy* recreates specific historical instances of trauma in Ireland, such as Ireland's neocolonial status, identifying split identity and non-conformism as outcries of a nation colonised by a post-colonial state, the 'unbalanced state' of Ireland and Irish identity, the instability of the community during the sixties, ... etc." (Gauthier 2003, 196-212).

This article has also analysed McCabe's use of satirical rhetorical strategies, such as fantasy, detachment, animal imagery, and scatology in order to present and condemn historical ecclesiastic child abuse in Ireland. As we have observed, as a child, Francie does not have the full control of language he would need to express all the traumatic effects of his dysfunctional ex-

istence. McCabe uses all these literary devices to present the story from a child's perspective, and thus cannot use sophisticated language to simply describe Francie's life. This is why McCabe has the child adopt the identity of the butcher boy, a lone outsider battling against tradition and convention. Francie gets no positive appreciation of his pain either from his family or his community, because there is no such thing as community in his town. He is rejected by all its members, who consider him and his family to be pigs. Francie is a victim of the system and his self-loathing drives him to become another boy: first, Mr Carruthers, a cartoon character; second, a holy boy; third, a butcher boy. It is only in the slaughterhouse where he works that Francie finds some reinforcement or recognition from society, and feels that he and his work are positively valued.

When his parents die, Francie makes of his job the centre of his life. However, the traumatic experiences he has suffered for so long have already affected the values that motivate his patterns of conduct and social interactions with the other members of his community. A direct consequence of these experiences is that Francie confuses the context of practice, and no longer knows where his professional skills as a butcher are appropriate. He thus ends up butchering Mrs Nugent as if she were a pig in her living room, the place where the Irish family traditionally gathers.

Childhood trauma hovers over Irish consciousness, a great tragedy that has been suppressed and remains strangely unacknowledged. In *The Butcher Boy*, Francie and his trauma within an incomplete, dysfunctional family serves as a metaphor for the sickness of the nation. McCabe, as satirist, ultimately shows concern for the freedom of the writer as a searcher for truth, and "his satiric practice becomes highly rhetorical and nonmoral too" (Terrazas 2016, 70). McCabe's satiric practice aims to make the reader face Ireland's tragic absurdities in the absurd conduct of Francie.

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