

ABSTRACT

Body and Mind of Violence: The Early Works of Bernard MacLaverty

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Bernard MacLaverty's often critically ignored early works embody and consider anti-violence rhetoric not limited to the concurrent Troubles of his native province, as well as model a process of coming to terms with a community "ripping itself apart" (Benito de la Iglesia 200). The depiction of characters' bodies in his short story collection, *Secrets* (1977), through illness, contamination fears, and death, demonstrates the commonality among diverse, often opposing, characters. The latter half of this chapter is concerned with bereavement theory as it appears in *A Time to Dance* (1982), a model of MacLaverty's own processing of the bodily effects of violence and his beginning to imagine means to reconciliation. Finally, analysis of his first novel, *Lamb* (1980), illuminates the role of one's creation of self-narrative in maintaining a moral compass or encouraging evil acts, a dangerous habit the author sees as analogous to Northern Ireland's Troubles and similar situations of violence.

Body and Mind of Violence: The Early Works of Bernard MacLaverty

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A Thesis

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

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Accepted by the Graduate School
August 2012

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Corey and Dr. Lisa Shaver for agreeing to be readers for my thesis. My previous experience with them convinced me of their valuable input on my work. I am grateful for their time and effort. I would also like to thank my thesis chairperson, Dr. Richard Russell, for his continuing compassion for his students and his subject matter. He introduced me to the beautiful works of Bernard MacLaverty and never hesitated to tell me the truth about the quality of my writing. For especially when this was hard to hear, thank you.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 1977, Belfast-born writer Bernard MacLaverty published his first collection of short stories, *Secrets*, to be followed only three years later by his first novel, *Lamb*. Next followed a second short story collection, *A Time to Dance* in 1982, to again be followed by a novel, *Cal*, the next year. The next eleven years yielded two more short story collections, then three years later a novel, *Grace Notes*, in 1997. In 2001, MacLaverty's fourth novel was published, and in 2006, his most recent publication, *Matters of Life and Death and Other Stories*. Many of his stories and three of his novels have made their way into new mediums, radio plays, screen plays, and films, with the majority of attention remaining on the second novel, *Cal*, and its film interpretation.

In *Cal*, the young Catholic male protagonist finds himself caught up in violent acts against his Protestant neighbors in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the novel's popularity is due to its direct association with the Troubles. While it indeed deserves the attention, the majority of MacLaverty's other works have not received their due. Arnold Saxton and George Watson refer to MacLaverty's technical development throughout his earlier works which make possible the complexity and weight of *Cal* and *Grace Notes*. Nonetheless, these earlier works carry more weight than they are typically credited with. I see not only technical development of the author's writing, but also a

personal development in the author as he considers violence in terms of bodies and minds.

MacLaverty grew up a minority Catholic in Belfast, a highly marginalized position, and this position combined with the deep history of Irish violence and sectarianism (Harris vii-viii) factor strongly in his work. While MacLaverty's message is broader than the Troubles, including similar situations in other countries as well as smaller scale tensions among people, I believe the particularity of bodies and the process of minds relevant to violence are significant to him because of his experience living in Northern Ireland. My reading therefore includes violence elsewhere, of which MacLaverty was aware. Indeed, the title of the following chapter derives from his interpretation of a Russian writer's comment on his own community's tensions.

Though MacLaverty's second and third novels, *Cal* and *Grace Notes*, have attracted significant critical attention from scholars such as Gary Brienza, Joe Cleary, Benjamin Griffith, Liam Harte, Richard Haslam, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Peter Mahon, Lauren Onkey, David Piwinski, Jeanette Shumaker, Barry Sloan, Gerry Smyth, and Stephen Watt, much is left unsaid about not only these novels, but also about the remainder of his canon. Attention to his later short fiction collections also seems to be growing with the in-depth reviews of *Walking the Dog* and *Matters of Life and Death* by James M. Calahan, Simon Baker, Tom Adair, and Michael Storey. Some critics have noted MacLaverty's literary influences, such as Stephen Watt including a chapter about MacLaverty in his book, *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing*. Meanwhile William Boyd and Lauren Onkey have examined the works' "Irishness." One major exception to

this skewed attention is Richard Russell's 2009 monograph, *Bernard MacLaverty*, which gives significant critical space to each short fiction collection and novel. Beside these, a few insightful critiques on the earlier works are available as well, including Haslam's recent "Character and Construction in Bernard MacLaverty's Early Short Stories about the Troubles" and Arnold Saxton's brief "An Introduction to the Stories of Bernard MacLaverty."

Given the underdeveloped critical attention given to MacLaverty's canon, especially for his first three major published works, *Secrets*, *Lamb*, and *A Time to Dance*, this thesis strives to refocus our attention on these works by illustrating their complexity and depth, despite their attractively simple veneer. My second chapter illustrates the literal embodiment of humanity's equality through its vulnerabilities in order to reject physical violence for symbolic causes in *Secrets*. Next, it traces bereavement theory through *A Time to Dance* in order to illustrate the author's developing imagination of an eventual peace in Northern Ireland to interpersonal relationships, tracing an overall trajectory from devastating loss toward hope. Haslam argues likewise that these two collections serve as a working out of the political atmosphere, seeming "to rehearse in miniature the narrative of destructive love that MacLaverty presented more cogently in *Lamb*, in which 'a man who claims to love...[a] boy and actually destroys him' intersects with 'people who claim to love their country [and] are actually destroying it' (83). While I disagree with Haslam's ultimate argument that MacLaverty's characters drastically weaken as they are stretched too thin across "so many hermeneutical levels" (83), I do agree that the characters in fact correspond to many levels of reading,

including those that recall both the rich literary relationships and the violent sects in reality.

In order to further demonstrate how MacLaverty has worked out his own reactions to the violence around him, my third chapter explores the theory of the narrative creation of self and its role in the title character's outcome. This chapter, like the previous one, explains the author's evolving view of violence and demonstrates his use of literary devices to try to understand how murderers could abandon basic ethics. In an interview with Marisol Morales Ladrón, MacLaverty discusses his novels, describing how the events in Northern Ireland had affected his writing at the time. *Lamb*, he says, is based very loosely on a news story he heard of a man running away with a boy:

The whole impression given by the judge was that there was a father and son relationship, and that it was done in some way for love. Right from the beginning, my thinking was that it was an image of what was happening in Ireland, that there were certain violent organisations and people who claimed to love Ireland but, in fact, were destroying it. This man says he loves the boy and yet he kills him. (208)

This novel and *Cal* (1983) are explorations of that very real possibility of how one might commit such violent acts against something one claims to love. As stated earlier, my thesis establishes that MacLaverty's experience in Northern Ireland draws his attention to this kind of violence, although his anti-violence rhetoric is much broader.

In his brief biography of MacLaverty, Michael R. Molino notes the apolitical nature of the author's message, writing, "Although MacLaverty does not use his fiction as the medium for advocating specific political or social policy, he nonetheless creates

characters and situations in his novels and short stories that extend beyond the inevitable passivity and resignation of Cal's fate" (176-177). Though I may occasionally use political language to describe MacLaverty's purpose, I believe Molino is right in this aspect: the author is not advocating any specific paradigm or action, but rather he is providing an alternative to passivity. Suzie Mackenzie notes as well in her interview with MacLaverty that he grieves for Ireland, he offers "[n]o redemption...[b]ut something else. What Flannery O'Connor, one of his favourite writers, called 'grace.' Revelation. Nothing more than the recognition that the ordinary is precisely the place where the extraordinary will be found" (3). In his superbly "ordinary" short fiction and his in-depth psychological development in *Lamb*, MacLaverty considers bodies and minds of violence in compassionate narratives that demonstrate the dangers of continuing to live like this, while modeling hope of escaping violence.

CHAPTER TWO

“We Can’t Go On Killing Each Other”: Embodied Anti-Violence Rhetoric and Bereavement in Bernard MacLaverty’s *Secrets* and *A Time to Dance*

[The reality of life in Northern Ireland] is an absurd situation—except that people die; absurd in an existentialist way. So it is just a way of scratching your head reading literature. My God, what are people trying to do to each other? Chekhov, at one point, was asked by friends: “What do you really mean to say in a play like that?” And he shrugged and said, “Gentlemen, we can’t go on living like this,” and that’s sometimes what literature is saying. We’ve got to change, we’ve got to do things differently, we can’t go on killing each other.

—Bernard MacLaverty

“Writing is a State of Mind Not an Achievement” (205-06)

When interviewer Marisol Morales Ladrón asked Bernard MacLaverty in 2001 whether “writers have a role to play in Northern Ireland... in a socially or politically committed way,” the author responded, “all writing is political, even writing which pretends not to be. It takes certain stands and certain issues and presents them.” In print, this opinion of the political nature of “all writing” appears after MacLaverty comments on Chekhov’s statement to his friends regarding the meaning of one of his plays, which MacLaverty rephrases to say, “we can’t go on killing each other” (Ladrón 206).

Wherever such violence occurs, it can be a result of mimesis according to René Girard. The following excerpt defines Girard’s concept of mimesis and how it results in violence:

If the appropriative gesture of an individual named A is rooted in the imitation of an individual named B, it means that A and B must reach together for one and the same object. They become rivals for that object. [...]If the tendency to imitate

appropriation is present on both sides, imitative rivalry must tend to become reciprocal; it must be subject to the back and forth reinforcement that communication theorists call a positive feedback. In other words, the individual who first acts as a model will experience an increase in his own appropriative urge when he finds himself thwarted by his imitator. And reciprocally. Each becomes the imitator of his own imitator and the model of his own model. Each tries to push aside the obstacle that the other places in his path. Violence is generated by this process; or rather violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means. (Williams 9)

Here, Girard begins to define his concept of mimesis and violence, how the imitation between two figures generates tension often leading to violence as they begin to compete for their shared goal.

This same tension is evident not only in factitious situations (surely Girard's purpose) but also in MacLaverty's fiction—specifically here in the time between publication of *Secrets* and *A Time to Dance*. The former, as I will show, demonstrates the commonality among diverse characters evident in the portrayal of their bodies. In a way, this through-line MacLaverty draws mirrors the mimetic communality of which Girard speaks when he writes, "Rituals confirm, I believe, that primitive societies are obsessed with undifferentiation or conflictual reciprocity that must result from the spread of mimetic rivalry" (10). In my discussion of bodies in *Secrets*, I articulate the contamination fears some Northern Irish Protestants have toward Catholics as mirrored in Sammy's grooming on his fiftieth birthday, which coincides with the creation of the Northern Irish state, as Stephen Watt has noted (94). Such a ritual, like other rituals necessary to bodily life such as hygiene, death, and illness, unites people through

similarities while also growing competitive tensions among them, which Girard argues results in aggression, violence, and even scapegoating.

I capitalize on discussion of these results in my reading of MacLaverty's second short fiction collection, *A Time to Dance*, the publication of which follows that of *Lamb*, the author's first novel which likewise comments on issues of sacrifice and violence. In this second collection, the interpersonal tension among characters belonging to the same community (father and son, husband and wife, son and neighborhood) becomes more apparent, as do the literal tensions of the Troubles in the life of the author. This collection includes a more defined sense of loss as a result ranging from mild aggression to blatant murder—a trend which I read as the author's mourning of such violence, in his Northern Irish community and beyond. As he writes the literary tragedies, MacLaverty is also considering the literal manifestations in his own world, apparent in his consistent reference to this context in interviews. Girard's theory of mimesis and violence provides a useful framework for considering the trajectory of MacLaverty's first two short story collections.

In discussing MacLaverty's rhetoric in *Secrets*, I focus mainly on how the commonality drawn among characters critiques the bigotry of violence, while also bringing about the inevitability of violence. Despite this loop, MacLaverty consistently demonstrates a preference for peace while acknowledging the risks necessary to obtain it. Girard argues that rituals and specifically the ritual of scapegoating are meant to break this loop (10), though MacLaverty's fiction seems to lack the scapegoat. Rather, as I demonstrate in my discussion of *A Time to Dance*, MacLaverty models bereavement

phases as he explores ways to connect characters in conflict, opening with a story of tragic murder and closing with the upturn of hope in a man's comic case of lock jaw.

Before sharing my analysis, I would like to make any politics perfectly clear. While MacLavery occasionally comments in interviews on the Troubles specifically (Ladrón, Mackenzie, Russell, Benito de la Iglesia), his scope supersedes this conflict and stretches across other political struggles, civil violence, and broken personal relationships. These collections often explore interpersonal strain in a way which comments as well on a larger reality and on the possibility of reconciliation regardless of scope.

In *Secrets*, his first published collection of short fiction, MacLavery uses his characters' bodies to illustrate the humanity and shared fallibility of all, in order to undermine the use of physical violence for symbolic causes. This is what I mean by "embodied rhetoric": the way in which the portrayal and treatment of characters' bodies communicate the author's values. In her book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas describes this in another way when she argues, "The rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society. The rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body" (128). In *Secrets*, MacLavery's representation of vanity, waste, and ailments of characters' bodies emphasizes their humanity—embodying a plea against violence by humanizing various manifestations of victims and their enemies. Furthermore, this emphasis on humanity compares all bodies in regard to worth. A person's (even an enemy's) value, therefore,

does not increase or decrease according to association with symbolic institutions like class, state, race, gender, or in the case of Irish sectarianism, religion. Therefore, MacLaverty's rhetoric of the body rejects the use of violence by illustrating the equal worth and equal fault of every human life, as encapsulated in his interpretation of Chekhov's comment. Then, in *A Time to Dance* which was published after the start of the Troubles, MacLaverty writes a series of stories which explore various dimensions of strained relationships as he mourns the current state of conflict and tries to imagine and make space for healing. Beginning with the shocking loss of a son and ending with a comic case of lockjaw, MacLaverty sets a trajectory of hope that mirrors the seasons of man expressed by the speaker of Ecclesiastes.

This study will first address the ways in which MacLaverty emphasizes the humanity of characters' bodies as a means of asserting anti-violence messages. Through this analysis, it will become clear how the stories in *Secrets* depict the vanity of characters as a cause of ignorance and neglect, how they portray bodily waste as fallibility, and how they unify human bodies through inevitable frailty. Then, my analysis of *A Time to Dance* examines the fruition of the potential conflicts raised in *Secrets* while attempting to make way for a reasonable peace by first understanding the reality of the conflict.

One of the most explicit invocations of Northern Ireland's sectarianism in *Secrets* occurs in the story, "A Happy Birthday," where Sammy's body becomes a manifestation of guilt and vulnerability. On his fiftieth birthday, Sammy prepares for a day of solo celebration by grooming himself to his best ability, looking at himself extensively in the

mirror, shaving, repeatedly smoothing his hair over his bald spot, and adjusting his clothes to hide their flaws (27). He seeks to present himself well, but his actions throughout the day undermine the air of respectability he tries to tidy. He endangers himself by drawing the attention of one soldier at the main gate in town, whose gun accidentally “pointed in the middle of Sammy’s chest” (28) when he leans in to hear Sammy better. Despite all of his effort to present himself well, to look the part of a respectable man, Sammy makes a fool of himself by stumbling, singing aloud, and finally vomiting on a carnival ride. He fails to attend to matters of greater import than his vanity or desire to drink. While Stephen Watt connects MacLaverty’s use of repetition (or imitation) and bodily humor to Beckett, my present argument builds on this idea as well, and like Watt’s analysis, it is not so narrow as to diminish the richness in the stories.

Likewise, Mary in “St Paul Could Hit the Nail on the Head,” attends more to physical appearance than moral behavior when she unexpectedly receives a familiar priest as a houseguest. She becomes embarrassed by the laundry strewn all over the living room, and soon after removing it and washing her face feels “a changed woman” (19). Yet, the conversation with her clerical guest yields evidence of her failure to take care of other, more important issues, like the conflict of religious beliefs in her marriage (21-22), her forbidden use of contraception (22), and even her poorly behaved children (23-24). Mary’s vanity, both problematic and quite understandable, at best creates a false sense of respectability, and at worst muddles her principles—both of which can misguide well-meaning action.

In both stories, Sammy's and Mary's superficial emphasis on the presentation of their bodies illustrate how vanity can lead to ignorance or avoidance of ethical matters which can have negative effects on oneself (Sammy and the soldier) or others (Mary and her children). Sammy is quite human in his desires, and Mary is within the bounds of expected self-importance. However, both characters are fallible because of their universal vanity. In both stories, the bodies and homes of the characters personify them as impure, a fear the Protestants in Ireland often had of their Catholic neighbors. Mary Douglas writes, "For us sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and purity are at opposite poles" (7), a remark that serves as epitaph for Bret Benjamin's article, "Dirty Politics and Dirty Protest: Resistance and the Trope of Sanitation in Northern Ireland," which explores the "dirty" prison protests in Northern Ireland in the 1980's (70-74) and Derek Mahon's "Courtyards in Delft." In this poem, Mahon's speaker ruminates on the clean, sparse Protestant house in contrast to the less orderly Catholic home. Douglas remarks on this Christian division as well when discussing Jewish purification practices she cites that "[i]n a sense magic was to the Hebrew what Catholicism was to the Protestants, mumbo-jumbo, meaningless ritual, irrationally held to be sufficient in itself to produce results without an interior experience of God" (18). Benjamin interprets Mahon's poem to illustrate "the way in which Europe is able to construct an image of its colonies which marks them as black—not only to denote racial difference, but also to define the colonial world as underdeveloped, as a place of filth in need of the sanitizing influence of the North" (67). Benjamin marks the ethical judgments made as well between "the two communities,"

Catholic and Protestant in the poem and “their efforts to define themselves against other communities primarily in through representations of sanitation and hygiene. In other words, to privilege a particular set of cultural values—in this case, an understanding of cleanliness—and to make ethical judgments about oneself and others based on those values” (66).

Overall, these critics and historians often cite a certain prejudice against the perceived “filth” of Catholics in favor of something like the “scrubbed yards, modest but adequate” associated with Protestant living. Thus, both Sammy’s and Mary’s preoccupation and ultimate failure with cleanliness speak of a trap of sorts in regard to their social perception of worth.

Universal fallibility also becomes clear in descriptions of bodily waste in both stories. In Sammy’s case, he boards a spinning carnival ride while quite drunk and vomits, spraying his waste all over the crowd: “people screamed and ran, covering their heads. One woman quickly put up her umbrella...It came out of him like sparks from a catherine wheel. An emulsion of minestrone-stout...Sparking off the tarmac paths, soaking spots into people’s Sunday best. Children slipped and fell” (29-20). The natural effects of getting onto a carnival ride while drunk have very clear and widespread negative effects on others, even endangering children. The analogy to the “catherine wheel” recalls humorously the explosive firework, while also recalling the instrument of torture named for Saint Catherine of Alexandria, a Catholic martyr familiar to Irish abbeys in Waterford and Dublin (MacLeod 195). While the Catholic saint is purported to have existed before the Reformation, her religious martyrdom strikes a

chord with the religious sectarianism noted in this story. As Sammy's birth corresponds with the birth of the "Protestant" Northern Irish state, so too do his actions and his body demonstrate the country's faults.

Less dramatically, Mary must hide her two-year-old's filled potty-training pot from her guest by getting "it out of the room as fast as she could, shielding it from him with her body" (19). Mary, unlike Sammy, is trying to spare others from being aware of bodily waste, not only removing it but also hiding it from the guest. She is embarrassed by its presence in front of the priest, although experience with fecal matter is universal. Mary denies truths of the human body for the outsider, while Sammy remains oblivious to his exposure of the crowd to his vomit. MacLaverty portrays the bodily waste of these characters in a way which shows them as human, drawing lines of universality among people, while also showing an amount of personal responsibility.

No amount of personal care or responsibility can protect a human body from its frailties, and in these stories, MacLaverty uses such vulnerabilities as he illustrates the universal needs and fallibility of human bodies. As mentioned earlier in my discussion of Sammy's vanity, the character continuously tries to cover his baldness by combing his hair over it, which ultimately fails after he leaves the ride: "His flap of hair hung by his ear and his head shone" (30). His body is vulnerable to time and no amount of effort to cover his baldness can change this. More pressingly, Sammy's very mortality suggested in the accidental aim of the soldier's gun reminds the reader of the vulnerability we all share. A threat or danger meant for one person can quite easily result unintentional harm to another.

For instance, Mary suffers from the punishment she inflicts on her son: "She was conscious of a throbbing bruise beneath her wedding ring, where she had hit the thick bone of Rodney's skull for doing what she was now doing herself" (24). This small-scale act of violence between mother and son imitates virtually any larger act of violence, where arguably both groups suffer physically or emotionally from any violent act. MacLaverty uses the frailties of age and pain to unify Sammy and Mary in their sense of humanity, while the effects of their well-intentioned actions reflect the reality of unavoidable mistakes.

MacLaverty, born a minority Catholic in Belfast, shows no ideological preference for this group, but rather debunks their superiority while simultaneously debunking the vilification of Protestant authority in "The Miraculous Candidate." Rather than favor one group, he humanizes and shows fault of characters on both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide. In this story, a young Catholic boy is taking his Junior Science exam, when his fervent prayers cause him to supernaturally hover above his seat. Throughout the story, the boy's Catholic sanctity affects his body supernaturally, while the Protestant invigilator's ailments and ugliness seem to the boy physical evidence of evil. It is helpful to notice the simplified social division between the religious groups that MacLaverty subverts by showing the weaknesses of both sides, resisting the sense of "pure black and white" as reviewer Anne Tyler calls it (39). Rather, the characters' bodies themselves undermine what Patterson and Corning call "predominant cultural dualities" (also Grant's "crude binaries" 142) which can become clear in the "central role of the body" as portrayal of "power as a dynamic social network" (9). In this case, the

cultural dualities divide the Catholic boy and the Protestant authority figure.

MacLaverty's portrayal of his characters' bodily forms blurs the division between these seemingly binary characters, making them indistinct in terms of responsibility and guilt.

From the very opening, the narration indicates that "John began to worry about the effects of his sanctity" on his body, as he has felt a "tingling, painful sensation in the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet," but more alarmingly, after fervent prayers he "felt himself being lifted up a full foot and a half above the bed—bedclothes and all" (41). Throughout the course of the story, John's bodily evidence of sanctity becomes a problematic focus.

Meanwhile, the invigilator's Protestantism becomes visible to the boy, as does a certain devilishness. Like many of MacLaverty's other characters, John notices peculiarities about the bodies of those around him, like the invigilator's "bad foot...high boot which squeaked every time he took a step... pale and full of suspicion...stringy hair...eyes darting back and forward" (42). Furthermore he continues to notice how the proctor "stood propped on his arms, his big boot balanced on its toe to take the weight off it" (42). All of these physical descriptions of the invigilator are followed immediately with a thought that condemns the man as evil according to the wisdom of the grandmother: "'If you ever meet the devil you'll know him by his cloven hoof' his Granny had told him" (42). Later on, the man hisses (44), gets "red in the face" (45), and clicks "his tongue angrily" (45). At another point, John observes the "man looked like a Protestant. The Ministry brought in teachers from others schools. Protestant schools. He wouldn't understand about Saints" (44). In this observation and following thoughts,

John identifies the invigilator as one outside his faith, and therefore an enemy of sorts, because of the lack of possible understanding between the two. The invigilator's body might not be a focus of narration for such a long run, except that MacLavery would want to convey John's reading of evil in him.

MacLavery sets up an essentially pure dichotomy between these two characters to begin with but still allows them to be individuals through particularities. Such a process accords with Patterson and Corning's contention that "body metaphors are used to explain the organization of many social institutions and patterns," (7-8) just as MacLavery shows the falsity of how John belongs to the sanctified group and the invigilator to the sinful one. And yet, "at the same time...individual bodies are read as surfaces for the marks of countless cultural distinctions" (Patterson and Corning 7-8), as John is also an individual raised by his grandmother and the only student in the room who received the wrong test, while the invigilator has very specific physical features and voice. Patterson and Corning's theory thus provides a lens through which to observe bodies rhetorically in complex works like MacLavery's. Thus, the boy's body is marked with Catholic distinctions, as the invigilator's is marked simultaneously as Protestant and perverse. The boy's reading of these cultural markers sets the stage for a complication of cultural duality.

As the story goes on, this Catholic boy of supposed sanctity and Protestant invigilator of visible devilishness conflict with one another, but MacLavery deftly complicates the resolution so as to undermine the appearance of good and evil in the two characters. The boy's sanctity causes him to hover above his seat, which the

invigilator perceives as his attempt to cheat. Ironically, it is the boy's fervent prayers to St. Joseph that cause him to float, though it is perceived by another as immorality. Adding to the irony, the boy resorts to sin in order to get himself back to normal gravity by whispering "Fuck the pope" and "as he did so, he plumped back down into his seat skinning his shin on the tubular frame of the desk" (45). At once he is rewarded in terms of hiding his sanctity and punished for cursing the pope when he receives bodily consequence. Thus, the boy's unseemly sanctity is tempered by his necessity and choice to sin, the results of which take bodily form. Now, he also has blemished body and may also limp like the invigilator.

Likewise, the invigilator's seeming depravity is undermined when he realizes that he has given John the wrong test—the very reason for John's confusion and fervent prayers. The invigilator apologizes and asks John not to tell anyone about the mix-up. He even offers to give John extra time to make up the time lost because of his own mistake. He lowers himself to the boy's level and asks, "This wee mix-up'll not go any farther than between ourselves, will it [...] Johnny?" (46). Then, he pats John on the back and returns to his desk (46). With the man leaning down to the boy's level and the touch exchanged between them, the two seem to be put on the same human plane, equally likely to sin or make mistakes, equally in need of grace from fellow people. In this way, MacLaverty complicates the bodily attitudes first shown in terms of holiness and depravity, and in the end gives the characters at these two extremes "normal," unremarkable bodies. Just as the invigilator will not turn John in for his class

disruptions, John also agrees not to tell others about the exam “mix-up,” and both then admit their own guilt and show one another grace.

Therefore, in terms of my larger argument, MacLaverty both addresses and debunks suspicions of his own loyalty to Catholics in the Irish tensions. Rather than take sides like the extremist groups responsible for much of the violence to follow the writing of these stories, MacLaverty allows these two opponents to make amends through acknowledgment of equal fault, apology, and offers of grace to one another, a pattern which will be explored further in my analysis of *A Time to Dance*.

These mutual offers of grace and ecumenical blame impress upon Anne Tyler, in her 1984 review of the collection that, “As in all stories that respect reality, there is no villain here, no pure black or white [...] This is the way the world simply is, MacLaverty seems to be saying: each of us bears some burden of unavoidable guilt” (39). Therefore, sectarianism must stop because we are all human beings of equal worth, because we are all equally capable of neglect and ignorance because of our vanity, because of the private functions and frailties of our bodies. We can’t go on killing each other, MacLaverty argues, because we are all flawed and therefore equally burdened with guilt. Tyler comes to this conclusion as a reflection upon the story “Hugo,” where an unfortunate suicide results from a boy’s well-meaning honesty. In this story, Hugo asks the boy for feedback on the book he is writing, and when the boy offers constructive criticism, Hugo disappears for a while, and eventually kills himself. The protagonist has pure intentions, without a doubt, and yet causes violence and death. This is the sort of principle MacLaverty demonstrates with his characters’ bodies: it is better to be innocent

than mistaken, but all are mistaken. Therefore, the call for innocence becomes more challenging since it is no longer a call to passively maintain it, but to actively foster it.

MacLaverty draws attention to flawed bodies not only because they demonstrate the general equality of everyday human faultiness, but because they are also naturally the focus when violence is at hand—it is quantified in terms of casualties. The profoundest effect of sectarianism when it turns violent is the bodily site of injury and mortality. Therefore, the body provides a powerful means for MacLaverty to communicate the shared and unavoidable burden of guilt. For instance, in “Where the Tides Meet,” the intended violence of a hunting trip leads to the accidental death of the men’s dog, and their interaction with its body as they try to bury it provides a means for MacLaverty to demonstrate the bodily effects of violence and contact with death.

From the beginning of the story, the narrator struggles to hold the chain on this very eager dog. While the men in this story are friends bound to a common purpose in hunting the rabbits, some are clearly responsible for others, like the father for his son, and the narrator for the dog. At first the narrator misunderstands the dog’s purpose, thinking it is there to retrieve prey, but the father is properly responsible for his child and is careful to keep his son “behind the line of the guns” (68). It is only a momentary negligence which allows the energetic dog to run wild and leap off the cliff. Indeed, the men are there for killing, but this death is accidental. As MacLaverty will demonstrate in his second novel, *Cal* (1982), the intention or willingness behind a preventable death is overshadowed by the casualty itself. Within the bounds of this narrative, it would not be outside the realm of possibility for tragedy to fall upon one of the human characters.

The narrative at times directs attention to the boy's vulnerability, like when his father directs him to walk behind the others, but ultimately demonstrates both the dog's bodily limitations and the narrator's unintended guilt for letting the dog loose.

After the dog's body is discovered, the narrator is afraid of it—afraid of contamination by fleas. The dog's owner, however, "hunkers down beside the dog" and "reaches over and undoes the dog's collar, then begins to put rocks on top of the dog" (71) not fearing closeness to the dead body. The narrator meanwhile continues to observe the dog as if it were alive, perhaps an act of disbelief, of guilt. He notices "[t]here is no blood, just a string of saliva which has touched on some rocks (71) and the "skin seems mobile when heavy stones are placed on it" (71). To him, the dog almost looks alive—there is no gore, only some spit. The mobility of the skin seems almost an echo of the dog's earlier eagerness and energy.

While less dramatic than a human corpse, this dog's body offers a means for MacLaverty to explore death without killing his human characters. This dog appears among several other dead animals in this collection, like the Grimleys' cat which ran out of the house "until a bus stopped it with a thud" (16) and the "six birds with their feet in the air, stone dead" (17) which die as collateral damage while Ma tries to poison the rat in her house, an effort in which she finally succeeds (17) in "A Rat and Some Renovations." However, with this dog the scene is tender as the men begin to bury and mourn him.

The story ends finally with an image of mourning: "On the way back to the car in darkness, we strung out, a single file, about ten yards between each of us, coming

together only to help one another over fences" (71). Typically, one would expect that in the comfort and visibility of daylight these people would more likely space out, but here in the dark they maintain their distance. Particularly important, though, is the latter half of this final sentence. They come together to help one another over fences; having suffered a loss, they have not lost sight of each other's bodily needs and limitations. It is this sort of consideration which carries into *A Time to Dance* where author, characters, and possibly readers alike mourn the season of loss and understand the importance of relationships as a means for healing.

Throughout the stories in *Secrets*, MacLaverty uses the human body to unite his characters, especially those who seem to be in opposition. Some of his characters even comment on the Troubles or confront soldiers, and they endanger themselves in doing so, if only incidentally. Tyler comments on the presence of unavoidable guilt in MacLaverty's fiction, which responds even-handedly to sectarianism. This reading does not limit MacLaverty's work to political agenda. Rather it demonstrates the inevitability of the human condition: Just as characters' bodies in relation and perception say much about who they are, MacLaverty's fiction suggests his own stance of anti-violence. As he indicates in his interview with Ladrón, in *Secrets* MacLaverty is presenting an issue and a stand. That which he reads in Chekhov, can be read in this collection: "We can't go on killing each other."

MacLaverty's bereavement of the acceleration of the real-life violence in communities like his own is evident in his next short story collection, *A Time to Dance*. Also evident in the collection is the author's desire for and imagining of peace. From

young boys forced by well-intentioned mothers to take piano lessons, to an elderly lesbian couple who runs a phone sex service to make ends meet, MacLaverty's *A Time to Dance* attempts to bring together such a varied cast for an ecumenical purpose. First, MacLaverty offers the reader a universalizing variety of lifestyles in this series of often grim stories; the wide cast is meant to appeal to a wider audience. Second, the binding of these characters and their stories together in one book suggests a new kind of togetherness that is altogether unexpected and necessary for peace in the divided Ulster of which MacLaverty writes. As I illustrated in my analysis of *Secrets*, it is through commonality and shared humanity that MacLaverty imagines peace, through biblical wisdom, here through universality of bodily needs, and through identification with others.

With its title rooted in the book of Ecclesiastes, MacLaverty's *A Time to Dance* is a book of bereavement which begins by acknowledging the loss and pain present in the community of Northern Ireland and which ends finally in the slightest image of hope in vulnerability, laughter, and empathy. Just as in Ecclesiastes whose speaker says there is a "time to kill and a time to heal; a time to wear down and a time to build. A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance" (*A Time to Dance* 28), this collection acknowledges the conflict at the onset of the Troubles while hoping for the next season of healing. It is no mistake that the text which identifies these seasons is a religious one which unites the Catholics and Protestants at war.

In his interview with Ladrón, as commented earlier, MacLaverty states that all writing presents political issues obliquely if not directly, and more specific to the

Northern Irish violence he believes “the solving of Ireland’s problems is not worth a single life” (Mackenzie T25). Craig Seaton, in *Northern Ireland: The Context for Conflict and for Reconciliation*, is likewise interested in the solving of Ireland’s problems. In this book, he first defines reconciliation as the changing of seasons from war to the sharing of common interests among the opposing groups, valuing and believing in the equality of the other party, seeking and reaching compromise, offering sincere apology, and moving beyond the past into the future (112). Before discussing methods for obtaining reconciliation, Seaton outlines the following “four primary obstacles to reaching a legitimate peace,” all of which can be seen to some extent in *A Time to Dance*:

- (1) the objective historical reality of—hostility, injustice, discrimination and violence each ethnic groups has experienced at the hands of the other group;
- (2) the subjective personal experience of pain, suffering, loss and fear which members of one group tend to associate with the actions of the other side;
- (3) the fact that in many cases the basic social institutions and other social structures which knot society together in Northern Ireland actually reinforce the ideas of separation, segregation and suspicion; and
- (4) the cumulative mind-set of the people, which is based upon the elements listed in items 1-3, works against taking risks for peace and reconciliation. (98)

He argues further that the beginning of reconciliation is in “modify[ing] the existing negative and hostile attitudes, and in some cases behavior, of one ethnic group toward the other” (99), although “this will never occur as a result of violence, and [...] the consent of a majority of the people in the North is required before this could take place” (100). Seaton admits that reconciliation can be attempted through several approaches, such as using violence and intimidation (108). Unfortunately, this method increases the obstacles of personal suffering and develops a defensive mindset which discourages more healthy, although risky, attempts for peace.

MacLaverty explores this kind of failure through the strangers at the door in "Father and Son," Liam's father's unsuccessful intimidation against art in "Life Drawing," and the abusive husband in "The Daily Woman." In all of these cases, violence only draws a stronger barrier between the opposing sides, creating real enemies where before was only tension. Richard Haslam recently noted a related thought, that, "[t]he failed personal relationship that produces emotional violence inside is implicitly juxtaposed with the failed political relationships that produce physical violence on the outside" (84). Seaton also mentions the appeal to figures of power for assistance, illustrated in "A Time to Dance" by Nelson's mother who flirts with the Housemaster in hopes of excusing her son's truancy (27-28) and similarly in "My Dear Palestrina" as Danny unsuccessfully appeals to his parents to let him continue his piano lessons with Miss Schwartz (66). The Housemaster's decision is not made known, but the implication is that Nelson continues in school despite this day's truancy. Danny poorly manages his appeal: "[he] screamed and shouted at his mother, hardly knowing what he was saying...He asked to be allowed back, he cried and pleaded" (66-67). Likewise, his parents mismanage this potential negotiation by raising the stakes and becoming violent as the "answers they gave him he could not understand. They called her a slut and spoke of marriage and sin and Our Blessed Lady...his father ended it by thrashing him with his belt and threatening to take an axe to the piano" (66-67). Danny intended to appeal to authority, but he seems to have overestimated his parents' power over the community's judgment of Miss Schwartz and their willingness to negotiate with him. As evident in this example, negotiations can fail if either side becomes defensive or takes

violent action instead of discussing this issue fairly. In a different way, the elderly lesbian couple in “Phonefun Limited” negotiate with their social position—another manifestation of community tension—as they creatively address their economic situation. Yet another example of poor negotiation can be hard to spot, but in essence, the priest in “The Beginnings of a Sin” pays off the boy who has witnessed his drunkenness.

The final illustration of negotiation is the most intentional and most laudable: the husband and wife in “Language, Truth and Lockjaw” take time away to work on their marriage and by the end have begun to succeed. A careful look at the situations in *A Time to Dance* yields a diverse set of interpersonal conflict which comments on various obstacles to and attempts for peace on various scales, and finally offers some hope at the end in the non-violent, low-risk conflict in “Language, Truth and Lockjaw.” Rather than simply coaching readers on proper negotiation or why appeals to authority may not work or the negative effects of enacting violence to make a point, MacLaverly attempts to:

utilize a particular ideology or world-view or a specific over-arching principle, to address the conflict. This paradigm is seen to provide necessary standards and objectivity necessary to both acknowledge the concerns and needs of all parties, and to arrive at a reasoned and empathetic decision which both parties can accept. This latter option is one which is generally developed within the context of religious institutions or by religious figures” (108-09).

Communities like Corrymeela founded in 1965, which promoted “an ecumenical vision of living out one’s faith in daily life across ethnic boundaries,” was strongly influenced by similar communities in Scotland, Italy, Germany, France, and the Netherlands

(Seaton 113-14). MacLavery was no stranger to this movement—its founding occurred in 1965 at Queens University Belfast when he worked there as a lab technician from 1960 to 1970, where he stayed to earn his degree in 1975 (Molino 173). Such a vision that Corrymeela espouses addresses the root of much of the conflict: the collective cultural mindset. However, because of its pervasiveness and subtlety, the most difficult obstacle to overcome is the mindset which prevents people from taking risks for peace. Therefore, any successful psychological persuasion may be the most effective. Intentionally or not, MacLavery treats the relationships in *A Time to Dance* in a way which causes thoughtful readers to consider such an argument for peace. After all, as Gerry Smyth argues, through aesthetic experience, such as fiction, people can be moved via repetition toward transformation of tolerance and peace.

Within this diverse group are several stories which critics like Robert Hogan have noted are more like vignettes than stories (194), yet even these critics commend the author in that “his many less ambitious sketches [have] a more varied view of life and a more evident craftsmanship than is to be found in most of his contemporaries” (194). Part of this craftsmanship is in depicting what Frank O’Connor deems the short story’s advantage over long fiction: “an intense awareness of human loneliness” (19). In *A Time to Dance*, stories like “No Joke” and “Eels” illustrate a bleak state of such loneliness and interpersonal conflict. In “Eels,” the old woman finds herself repeatedly playing a game she cannot win and secretly visiting her son’s home when he is away at work. Throughout the story, she reflects on the past, thinking about her estranged son and daughter-in-law while sneaking around their home. Her loneliness becomes even

clearer when she quietly protests from the yard against the daughter-in-law who has come home sooner than expected, words which “were the first... she had spoken since Tuesday” (157). Shortly after, she realizes “her life was over. It hadn’t come out. Not the way she wanted” as she ventures home in the dark afraid of the eels beneath her feet and her coat unbuttoned (158). Unlike Nelson’s abandon at the end of “A Time to Dance” when he rips off his eye patches, this old woman’s walking home with her coat unfastened cannot be read positively. Rather, it is a manifestation of her abandon; she knows she is ill, refuses to see a doctor, and still does not attempt to make amends with her son. She continues instead to secretly dwell on the past, not unlike the father and son in the collection’s opening story who hold grudges but never make themselves vulnerable in order to reconcile. This story among others in the collection acknowledges the initial state of relationships, and while it is bleak, it is a first step in mourning and then imagining healing.

Bereavement can also be read in three of the most striking stories in the collection, especially in working out the complicated facets to conflict and resolution. One such story, “Father and Son,” explores the almost paradoxical division between two people who should be allies. It begins with alternating interior monologue of both of the title characters which makes plain the misunderstanding and conflict between them. While the son thinks, “in a few minutes he will come in to look at me sleeping. He will want to check that I came home last night...I will sleep for him,” the father thinks, “When he sees me he turns away, a heave of bedclothes in his wake” (9). Throughout the short story, the reader learns more, but never a full explanation of the events. This

dynamic parallels the sectarianism prevalent in Northern Ireland even before the writing of these stories. Rosemary Harris, in her 1972 ethnography, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster* argues, “all social relationships are pervaded by a consciousness of the religious dichotomy” and because of this “separation of the social fields of Protestant and Catholic, even neighbours belonging to the different sides remain in some sense strangers” (xi). This father and son likewise hold different beliefs, find themselves in differing social circles, but are family, living together, and are still strangers in many senses.

The antipathy between the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland can be traced back at least as far as 1690, when William of Orange defeated James II at the Battle of Boyne (Seaton 3), and such a long history of violence plays a key role in “Father and Son.” Here, the implication is that the son has become involved in some extremist activities—and it costs his life when he is shot in the face at his own front door (14). This loss the father suffers will likely make it difficult to forgive those responsible. Similar previous losses of the wife/mother they have lost and likely neighbors and acquaintances creep into the psyches of these characters. For instance, the father thinks, “Is it my fault a good woman should die?” (10). Also, the son finds it safer to sleep in the daytime as “[t]he sound of ambulances criss-crosses the dark,” presumably with local victims of the sectarian violence (10). The son even sees his father’s fear, and thinks, “You think the world is waiting round the corner to blow your head off” (11). These experiences have developed a mindset within these two men of hardness and fear of vulnerability. It is clear in the alternating perspectives that the father and son

have not spoken to one another openly for some time, thus preventing them from reaching resolution, although they express similar desires to go fishing like they used to, unbeknownst to each other (10, 12).

The only “higher authority” to whom they appeal for help is the wife/mother they have lost. When they invoke her memory, though, they only draw more distance between themselves. For instance, the father despairs at the lack of a “woman in the house” (10) and the son thinks, “My mother is dead but I have another one in her place. He is an old woman. He has been crying” (11). Throughout the story, each of the characters thinks of the other as (and father of himself as) a woman in an insulting way of pointing out the other’s weakness, or his own feeling impotence. Both are unwilling to acknowledge their shortcomings to the other, interested more in pointing out each other’s flaws—again precluding them from reaching reconciliation. Because of their lack of honest communication, the son’s refusal to speak to his father, and the father’s failure to successfully support his son in needful times, these two are unable to accrue common interests, respect one another, or apologize or reach a compromise in communicating with each other, and thus they cannot move forward. As they hold on to debts owed, “I have given you the life you have now,” and faults of the other, these two reach a stalemate (11).

Unfortunately, this season of tension between father and son will not see another spring. Only when the son is dead can the father hold him as closely as he earlier imagines, “Let me put my arm around your shoulders and let me listen to what is making you thin” (11). Between these two characters, there will be no reconciliation.

However, the collection moves forward into other lives in which the reader can see this loss in the context of a whole community of loss. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews describes this trend among several Northern Irish writers, “older writers such as Moore, McCabe and MacLaverty sought to reveal the universal truth of specific individuals’ struggle in a hostile world” (92) as MacLaverty assembles specific instances to represent a wider community. It should be noted, however, that Kennedy-Andrews faults MacLaverty for not imagining a solution; yet I see in these collections an author struggling to compassionately understand the conflict which is nearly the best “solution” an author can give his reading public.

One such community is that in the title story, “A Time to Dance.” In this story, Nelson and his mother are considered outsiders as Irish people in Scotland—“His mother was Irish. That was why she had a name like Skelly. That was why she talked funny” (16). When Nelson’s mother catches him being truant, she must take him to the bar where she dances erotically for a living. Although she demands Nelson put his prescribed eye patches on both eyes rather than just his bad eye while she works, he begins to understand the nature of her work and that of the community. When he is supposed to be sitting quietly with patches on both eyes, he is exploring the back room, noticing, “his mother’s things, hanging on the hook; her tights and drawers were as she wore them, but inside out and hanging knock-kneed on top of everything” (22). Then, after stacking boxes to see out the window above the door he “couldn’t see his mother anywhere” but rather “a crowd of men standing in a semicircle” who were all “watching something which Nelson couldn’t see” (23), his mother. When she returns after several

loud songs the blinded Nelson accidentally feels “her bare stomach, hot and damp with sweat” (24). By this point, Nelson has all the clues he needs to understand that his mother is a stripper, which he may begin to assemble when she takes him back to school and her appearance “caus[es] a stir” (24). Although he is momentarily proud of the attention she attracts (24), he has no friends at school (27) and is often made fun of (17). Alienated, these two are disempowered to overcome any of their obstacles in order to socialize well with those around them and secure their place in the community.

When it comes time for them to attempt reconciliation with one another and others, neither seems to find consistent success—their improvement lies in Nelson’s eventual maturing to simply move beyond the past without demanding compromise or apology. Nelson misbehaves, but does not hate his mother like the son in the first story hates his father. The conflict here is much more subtle and everyday than that in “Father and Son.” Skelly threatens twice to “kill” Nelson if he does not go back to school (19), “if I come back here and you have those [eye patches] off” (21), and she hit him in the head, “he felt her bony hand strike his ear” when he uses a Scottish colloquialism, “Ah ken” (21). Indeed, in her rough but ultimately loving treatment of her son, Skelly’s and therefore Nelson’s conflict is with their community; Skelly’s young pregnancy and low socio-economic status in a way serve as a history of bad treatment which can make it more difficult for her to operate in her present community. For instance she is poorly treated by her boss, who scolds her when she brings Nelson with her, “What the hell is this? ...You’re late, and what the hell is that? [indicating Nelson]” (20). This can also be seen in the Housemaster’s office when her tone changes upon

discovering that the Housemaster is also Irish and Nelson notices he “had never heard his mother so polite” (26). Further tension appears earlier when Nelson remembers that his mother “kept telling him that someday they were going back [to Ireland], when she has enough ha’pence scraped together” (16). In defiance of her situation, she tells him, “‘Until then I’ll not let them make a Scotchman out of you.’ But Nelson talked the way he talked” (16). Skelly’s statement reveals the tension between the Irish and Scottish societies through Skelly’s preference for the Irish and Nelson’s acclimation to his Scottish community. In terms of conflict and reconciliation among sectarian groups, Skelly’s and Nelson’s intercultural experience illustrates the obstacles that divided loyalty and historical (even generational) prejudices can become for those who must navigate the “crude binaries” (Grant 142) of such a divided society.

In navigating these obstacles, these two characters attempt several methods to reach reconciliation with each other and those around them. First, Skelly tries to alleviate some of her conflict with her son by striking him and being harsh with him verbally. Not only does Skelly threaten to kill Nelson for misbehaving and striking him for improper speech (21), but she also swears at him, asking “What the hell are they teaching you to cook—sides of beef?” (17) and exaggerates negative consequences to his actions, saying, “In the name of God, Nelson, what are you doing here? Why aren’t you in school? ...Do you realize what this means? They’ll put me in bloody jail. It’ll be bloody Saughton for me, and no mistake” (18). But because of the boy’s curiosity and even the harshness of her tactic, this aggression relieves nothing. In response to this threat, Nelson shouts into a crowd that this woman, his mother, is trying to kidnap him

(18-19). Again, Skelly attempts to solve the issue between Nelson and the Housemaster in an unhealthy way, by “appealing” to the man with her body: “As he left, Nelson noticed that his mother had put her knee up against the Housemaster’s desk, and was swaying back in her chair, as she took out another cigarette” (28). Although this may qualify more appropriately as “negotiation” since she is appealing to the person with whom the conflict lies, it nonetheless illustrates the negative model she enacts for her son, and possibly the model she was taught by her own parents.

Despite these attempts for peace, this mother and son do not find peace between them within the text of the story, but the story is hopeful for them nonetheless. The lack of common interests between them, Skelly’s refusal to treat her son like an equal, and her unwillingness to compromise with or apologize to him are all overshadowed by the likelihood that they will move beyond this situation as Nelson matures. First, the boy is young and is not surprised to be treated this way by his single mother. Secondly, he will grow up, and as he does, she will likely adjust to his age and give him appropriate autonomy. Finally, and most convincingly according to Russell’s positive reading of the final scene, Nelson will mature as he launches himself into the future, now “determin[ed] to concentrate more fully on his lessons, a potentially liberating move which will allow him to quit using his lazy eye as an excuse to be a bad student” (61). In the concluding scene, Nelson rips off his eye patch meant to keep him from becoming blind, “thinking that if he was going to become blind then the sooner it happened the better” (29). Even this impulsive attitude bodes well when contrasted with Nelson’s earlier fear: “He had kept his eye patch on longer than usual because his mother told

him the night before that if he didn't wear it he would go 'stark staring blind.'...Nelson was worried because he knew what it was like to be blind" (15). Whether this change indicates optimistically that Nelson welcomes the future, whatever it may hold, without letting the fear of it hinder his experience of the present, or pessimistically that he is giving up, Nelson either way is embracing his future in a new way not taught to him by the failures of others. At the end of the story, it seems Skelly and Nelson may never rise above their current economic station, but if Nelson continues to welcome the future brazen-faced, then even this status will not burden him.

On the other hand, a character like Miss Schwartz in "My Dear Palestrina" feels powerless to change her perception in the community and therefore her livelihood in the future, though Danny's new complexity of thought remains hopeful. The most significant arc is that of the conflict between Miss Schwartz and the community which condemns her, with Danny caught in the middle, desiring peace between the two. The mindset of the community surrounding Miss Schwartz is suspicious of what they consider amoral behavior, her unwed pregnancy. Even Danny's young peer Mingo perceives Miss Schwarz's pregnancy as evidence of poor moral character when he tells Danny, "She's a ride...She's going to have a baby" (55). Because there is already some division between Miss Schwartz and her community, this incident nearly precludes reconciliation. If Miss Schwartz had been warmly included in the community, as Danny is, her pregnancy still would have been an issue, but it would not have caused her to lose her only source of income.

In response to her exclusion, Miss Schwartz does not try to negotiate or appeal to anyone; she certainly does not resort to violence, and she has no vision for an ecumenical paradigm. She tells Danny at their last lesson, "You are one of us" (65). Thus, none of the facets of reconciliation visit her. Her community has banished any previous common interest in music education for their children, they look down on her for her amoral act, and are unwilling to compromise or apologize to her for their banishment. Together, they will not move beyond the past, but rather will remain in this state indefinitely, probably until Miss Schwartz leaves town.

From this grim state, only Danny offers hope for peace. As her only ally, sharing with her a love of music which he owes to her, he resists the community's decision. While he does not completely understand the situation, he seems to be avoiding becoming what the blacksmith calls "yes-men" (51). Although Danny's father warns him against this man, he continues to visit the forge but not as regularly (60). There is no implication that Danny will take an interest in extremist activities like the blacksmith suggests, but Danny does take on the challenge to not be a yes-man, to "think" and not "accept what people tell you—even your father" (60). As Danny walks away from the forge this time, he "waited for the hammer blows so that he could walk in step but none came and he had to choose his own rhythm" (61), symbolizing his beginning to think for himself. Later, he fights to maintain his lessons with Miss Schwartz against his parents' decision, thus trying to prevent her exclusion from the community, even if he thinks of it in terms of his own benefit. After Miss Schwartz tells him that his mother will not allow him to come back after this lesson, Danny thinks

of being taken away from this room, never to be allowed back again to talk and work with Miss Schwartz. Never to be allowed to call in on the blacksmith and be talked to as if he were a man...He thought of being deprived of all this, never to be allowed back to it. And he began silently in his own dark to cry." (65)

In this passage it becomes clear that while Danny's thoughts are essentially selfish, his instinct is to be inclusive of these people his parents and the rest of the community would exclude. At the thought of their exclusion and his resulting loneliness, "his own dark," he weeps for the loss.

At the end of the story, Danny comes in from the cold as his mother requests, "Come into the heat, love...come in from the night. Join us," (67), but it is not clear whether this is a positive ending. Indeed, it seems Danny has not succeeded in changing his parents' minds, and his going back inside with his mother seems a sort of defeat. And yet, the blacksmith's character may have something to offer besides a distraction for Danny, though his father warns him, "If he's pouring the same poison into your ear, son, as he's been spewing out in the pub, he's a bad influence...Danny, steer clear of vermin like that or you'll feel the weight of my hand" (57). The blacksmith's discussion of yes-men, although the man believes in the extremist groups unlike Danny's father, creates a dynamic where Danny's resistance to his parents represents independent thinking—a most important factor for peace. To this effect, Seaton writes of how the "long-term antipathy between the two communities...has created a family ethos in which the other side is 'demonized,'" citing a story where a seven-year-old threw rocks at a patrol because "you b[astards] have been exploiting us for 300 years and we are not putting up with it anymore" (15). Furthermore, he argues

this development of hatred results from the personal suffering many families experience, which becomes “part of the socialization experience for the children” (15). In the sort of homogenous community Danny’s family seems to be building by excluding “others” like Miss Schwartz and the blacksmith, then the society is no longer dynamic, and possibly no longer capable of positive change. Danny’s resistance, in the end, is hopeful whether or not he succeeds in changing the minds of others. As long as he carries this ability with him in the future, Danny may be a positive force for change in his community.

The most hopeful arc in this collection comes at the end, in “Language, Truth and Lockjaw.” It illustrates the mindset in the protagonist whose personality has unintentionally begun to harden against his wife and who is insensitive to the mentally handicapped men next door. In this story, the man suffers a frustrating but ultimately comic case of lockjaw which helps him, I argue, to empathize with the men next door, as he can only speak in nonsense syllables, finds himself drooling, and the cause of his wife’s laughter. Watt traces explicit references to Beckett in MacLaverty’s earlier fiction like “The Drapery Man” and “At the Beach.” In these, he recognizes the author’s attraction to Beckett’s “mischievous humor” (106). Watt goes on to assert how Beckett’s irony, when applied by MacLaverty, serves as an opposition to the Troubles, with the humor individualizing and healing the victims. Through irony, he writes, a hybrid reality is created by which the characters are able to escape complete despair (118). In illustrating this strange sort of emotional healing through vulnerability and laughter at oneself, MacLaverty begins to imagine how all of the above discussed obstacles might be

overcome, how certain solutions work in some cases and not others, and thus he begins to imagine what reconciliation might look like in the wider scope of sectarianism, and by the time he write these stories, the Troubles.

Critics like Hogan (194) and Russell (51) have noted the variety in this collection of life stages and experiences of the characters, and I suggest a purposeful reading of such a conglomeration. As with *Secrets*, where I argued that MacLaverty makes a humanist statement through the rhetoric of bodies, in *A Time to Dance* MacLaverty seems to be addressing the issue of societal division through his characters. Both within and among these stories, characters are at odds with one another, some failing in good intentions, others succeeding in bad acts, and yet others confused about which is which. By collecting them together and juxtaposing one with another, while in each story getting to the complexity of human relationships and often leaving the reader unsure of hope, MacLaverty in a way begins to break down some of the barriers among them. For himself, he enacts grievance for the current season of division. With the slightest upturn of hope in the final story, MacLaverty seems to be making space for the next season: a season of healing to follow this season of killing, a season of building to follow this season of wearing down, and a time to dance to follow this season of mourning.

CHAPTER THREE

“The Evil that Results”: Narrative Creation of Self in MacLaverty’s Lamb

It has often been remarked that making sense of one’s life as a story is also, like orientation to the good, not an optional extra; that our lives exist also in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrator can answer. In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.

—Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (47)

We identify arrogant ignorance by its willingness to work on too big a scale, and thus to put too much at risk. It fails to foresee bad consequences not only because some of the consequences of all acts are inherently unforeseeable, but also because the arrogantly ignorant often are blinded by money invested; they cannot afford to see bad consequences.

—Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance* (54)

My previous chapter explores a connection to MacLaverty’s observations of human warfare, bodily worth, and sometimes feeble attempts to reconnect in his first two short story collections. MacLaverty’s concern is broad and his compassion evident in the personification of his characters. These characters, like any acquaintance, have not only bodies that can communicate but also minds that can create or err. Just as MacLaverty’s personal observations make their way into his short fiction, his struggle to understand human nature and its perversions appear in his first novel, *Lamb*.

As already discussed, MacLaverty’s use of bodies in *Secrets* demands unilateral respect and fault-finding, thus embodying a plea against violence. In *Lamb*, MacLaverty shows a character too concerned with his own plan to consider the respect he should give the boy’s body that he takes into his care. Initially through this mistake, Lamb

condemns the boy to tragedy and himself to delusion. In terms of my larger argument, *Lamb* demonstrates the consequences of failing to follow the precepts demonstrated by MacLaverty in his first two short story collections. *Lamb* fleshes out the consequences of the penchant for violence MacLaverty recognizes in his own community.

My analysis of *Lamb* acknowledges my earlier argument of embodiment while focusing on psychological circumstances that can lead to major errors in judgment. Although this chapter does not focus on treatment of bodies but rather some dangerous mental patterns, the arguments remain connected. As a body cannot properly be considered separate from the mind, and vice versa, MacLaverty's work consistently accounts for both. For even in *Lamb*, when the primary struggle is in the mind of the title character, the outcome is violence against a vulnerable body.

In the preface to his book on autobiography, Paul John Eakin identifies his present work as being "about how we come to be the people we say we are when we write—if we ever do—the stories of our lives. Thus my concerns are both literary and experiential, for the selves we display in autobiographies are doubly constructed, not only in the act of writing a life story but also in a lifelong process of identity formation..." (ix). Eakin's insight into the creative process of self-narrative opens the interplay of the literary and experiential sources of a person's narrative of self, especially in people who occasionally confuse the good and evil within themselves. In *Lamb*, the main character mistakes poor choices for noble ones, a confusion which finally ends in tragedy. This extreme example of the confusion of good and evil provides a great

example of the power of the creation of self-narrative and its role in identifying good and evil.

In *Lamb*, MacLaverty explores the dangers of what Eakin identifies and what psychologist Jerome Bruner calls “the narrative creation of self” (63). Michael Lamb begins to re-enact mythical, religious, and personal narratives, and despite his good intentions to be a positive father figure, becomes a figure of evil. According to Bruner, creation of a successful self necessitates first, a balance between autonomy and social commitment, and second, reflection on a positive narrative of success. These needs highlight how Lamb’s mental predispositions and removal from community transform benign narratives into encouragement for committing evil acts. Following the tragic end of the novel, he reflects, “The good that I do is the evil that results” (152), but Lamb’s “confusion of...motivations” (Brienzo 67) need not be our own. Analysis of Lamb’s creation of his identity through these external narratives suggests how gentle Brother Sebastian at the beginning of the novel becomes the Michael Lamb on the beach in County Donegal with a boy’s corpse in the sand and blood on his hands.

This chapter first illustrates the effects of Lamb’s societal limitations including his impulsiveness, emotionalism, pride, simplistic thinking, idealism, and chosen isolation; next, it explores how his need for a narrative of success will lead to his brutal murder of young Owen Kane. First, Bruner argues that the tension between autonomy and social commitment is necessary for the proper narrative creation of self. Taylor describes this autonomy in terms of a “framework” to guide a person’s actions wherein “some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others

which are more readily available to us" (19). As I will discuss, when Lamb isolates himself with Owen, he creates a shifting framework from the narratives in his mind, and his misinterpretation of them severely mislead his moral framework. Furthermore, Lamb's simple-minded idealism means he has exceptional need for others, making his isolation especially dangerous. When he removes himself from community and lives in hiding, he abandons others in favor of himself, thus creating a volatile environment of unchecked pride. Secondly, when Bruner speaks of one's need for a "narrative of possible recovery" (107), or a narrative of success, he means simply a specific story in which one can envision his own victory. For example, someone on the job market might imagine himself in the mythical narrative of King Arthur—envisioning himself easily pulling the sword from the stone; such a fantasy can psychologically encourage one's success in an actual job interview. Lamb's unfulfilled need for such a positive narrative, in conjunction with his unchecked pride, leaves him hopeless and unable to imagine a truly positive ending for himself. His bad decisions are inspired by improper discernment of narratives meant to "forewarn rather than to instruct" (Bruner 15). He overlooks the happy ending for Isaac in Genesis and instead remains locked into Abraham's intent to sacrifice the boy. He also fails to see the forewarning in the Daedalus myth, allowing himself to become caught up in its narrative instead, becoming even a "danger-seeking Daedalus" (Russell 45). He is additionally unable to discern the positive messages from narrative mass media, since they perpetually distract or encourage destructive action. The tragic conclusions of his biblical, mythical, and

cultural source narratives doom his reality, while his isolation exacerbates his mental predispositions, yielding for Lamb a tragic narrative with himself as antagonist.

Lamb, despite his seemingly idyllic upbringing, fails to act appropriately in the novel partly because of his predisposition to delusion and impulse. Whether his mental instability is a result of his time in the clergy away from the public, personal choice, or simply inborn, his initial decision to take Owen away is irrational. To suit his pride in his ability to care for the boy better than anyone else, he risks his own and Owen's lives for a journey with no plan, and no vision of a positive ending. His prideful good intentions blind him to the danger posed by his running away with the boy. Lamb's thinking is simplistic and self-centered. His removal from honest community, initiated with and prolonged by his kidnapping of Owen, exacerbates his natural disposition to mental instability. When the death of Lamb's father untethers him from the Brothers, his mind comes increasingly unhinged. Thus his narrative creation of self goes awry.

In *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, Bruner traces the uses of story in various realms, including the creation of self. In a general explanation of the interplay of the two, he writes, "Never mind that we know, again implicitly, that the real world is not 'really' like this, that there are narrative conventions governing storied worlds. For we also cling to narrative models of reality and use them to shape our everyday experiences" (7). Upon this concept, Bruner builds his more complex arguments regarding the function of this process. Messages of narratives tend to be implicit, and most people learn to discern them despite the range of possible interpretations. Additionally, narrative is shaped by reality and has the ability to shape one's experience

of reality. Stephen Watt likewise argues in terms of MacLaverty's later novel, *Cal*, that myth can serve as justification for a person's actions (135). Not only are these fantasies available, but they also condone or incite violence when the individual is already predisposed to a violent ideology: "The causes of murder of Robert Morton and the maiming of Morton's elderly father, Cal concludes, reside in ideology and the representations that further it—in mythologies, not in facts, historical or material" (136). After all, narratives are created to affect people's lives, as they traditionally illustrate proper behavior and the effects of improper behavior in order to inform action. Finally, Bruner illustrates the role of narrative in shaping one's concept of self and the constraints to which an individual is subject.

Before delving into the specifics of Bruner's theory, I want to establish Lamb's process of narrative creation in the novel. At various points, Lamb narrates to himself or to Owen his own situation. After leaving the borstal, Lamb reflects on his moral training there as both advantageous (110) and, at another time, as a waste: "He knew now his time there had been wasted. His life had been governed by a series of prohibitions and, while God existed for him, this was acceptable. But once he ceased to believe in the God of the Brothers, all he was left with was a handful of negatives" (90). In this inconsistent telling of this time at the Home, Lamb crafts a version to fit into his present narrative. As Monika Fludernik argues, "Narratives construct selfhood as individuality and [a] functional role. Such identities...deliberately elide or camouflage possible negative facets of the self" (260-61). In other words, because narrative selves are created with some function in mind, to make one look for example moral or courageous, they often

leave out conflicting details. Only the supporting elements remain in a sort of selective selfhood. When enjoying his new freedom, Lamb thinks condescendingly of the system of the church, but when he reflects on his occasional pessimism and his need to make the most of his time with Owen, he reasons that his time at the Home was a waste. In both cases, Lamb selects the memories to reinforce his current mood.

In addition to Lamb's self-narration of the past, he also verbalizes his present situation with Owen. After the boy leaves his side in a crowd, he reprimands him, threatening the boy with a narrative of their getting caught: "Yes, Officer, I want to report a missing boy. I know he couldn't find his way back to the hotel. So he's well and truly lost—in London, a city of...fourteen million? Yes, you see we ran away together from a Borstal in Ireland. No, I'm not his father" (59). Lamb is trapped by the narrative of his life, one he has chosen, and his occasional depiction confirms a certain level of sanity in that he understands how things look from the outside. His anxiety also exaggerates some elements, like doubling the population of London.

Lamb furthermore attempts to create narratives of his future, mentally sketching the progress of his situation. He tends to abandon a narrative as soon as a conflict arises, to resign himself to failure or blind idealism, and to yield to luck. For instance, when Lamb thinks of their staying at the squat in London, "His spirits soared. He laughed and warmed to Haddock, wanting to hug him. The taint evaporated. Here was an opening. He could scrap the plan, get himself a job, have Owen with him. They might *never* be found. It didn't matter what the place was like, it would have to do" (121). Lamb's impulse in accepting such an offer from a stranger and attaching such strong

hope to it (“it would have to do”) shows the unreliable idealism of Lamb’s narratives. The shape of Lamb’s narrative simultaneously results from and informs his reality.

In other treatments of his future, Lamb avoids thinking about the practical concerns and instead desires the distraction of media. Once when eating alone, “his mind kept running away with him. Mentally he kept pulling the reins and saying Whoa! every time he thought about what they were going to do...” (97). He goes on to wish “he had bought a paper to occupy him” (97).

Lamb’s inconsistent narrative shows its versatility, especially in regard to “the plan” which he never verbalizes. He alternates between concluding there is “no choice” but to follow through, and “no choice” but to accept hope. Initially, he receives “glimmerings of a plan...terrible in its implications” (104), then he doubts he will “have the courage to carry it through” (105), thinks there is “no way out for them, either Owen or himself” (105). Next, he thinks getting more money from Maguire is the “one thing that could save him from the plan” (106). Later, after failure with Maguire, he resolves it “would have to go ahead. It was the only way” (108). When he meets Haddock, Lamb thinks, “He could scrap the plan” (121), and later has “hope for the future...a fighting chance” (123). When again reconsidering his decision, he thinks, “Owen was without a future—either way” (130). Lamb then justifies himself once again, reasoning, “God knows, he had tried every way to avoid it. It was the only answer left” (132). In his final use of this language, Lamb expresses a desire to “justify himself to someone, to say that this was the only possible way” (139). He wants to tell a narrative with a fixed ending to prove he has no choice but to murder Owen. In this series of Lamb reasoning himself

out of blame—finding hopeful alternatives, hardly exhausting them, and coming back to the “inevitable” plan—the power of his created narrative is clear. If his narrative of the moment has hope, so does Lamb. If not, he considers the plan inescapable.

Lamb’s personal narratives, as I have already delineated, clearly suffer from two basic needs for the successful narrative creation of self; the first of these is the need to balance autonomy and commitment to others. In arguing that the creative process of “self-making” is both internal and external Bruner writes, “The inside of it, we like to say in our Cartesian way, is memory, feelings, ideas, beliefs, subjectivity...But much of self-making is from the outside in—based on the apparent esteem of others and on the myriad expectations that we early, even mindlessly, pick up from the culture in which we are immersed” (65). Wider culture and individuality therefore each have great influence on the creation of the self. Each aspect yields to the others and the lack of one can offset the rest.

Bruner stresses the importance of balancing autonomy and commitment to society, calling the process a “balancing act” which

must, on the one hand, create a conviction of autonomy, that one has a will of one’s own, a certain freedom of choice, a degree of possibility. But it must also relate the self to a world of others—to friends and family, to institutions, to the past, to reference groups. But the commitment to others that is implicit in relating oneself to others of course limits our autonomy. We seem virtually unable to live without both, autonomy and commitment, and our lives strive to balance the two. So do the self-narratives we tell ourselves. (78)

Here, Bruner describes the basic human need to understand one’s individuality as well as human context.

One cautionary tale of a person pursuing perfect autonomy and leaving behind all human context, that of Christopher McCandless of Jon Krakauer's account, *Into the Wild*, demonstrates a few similarities with Lamb which can enlighten the process of his errors. Twenty-three-year-old Christopher McCandless was found dead from starvation after three months of living off the land of remote Alaska, a move one critic calls a "radically autonomous identity gone wrong" (qtd. in Bruner 79). Much like Lamb sees no possible future for himself or Owen within the human context they know, McCandless forsook human commitment in pursuit of perfect autonomy, arguably a perversion of Thoreau's words, "simplify, simplify." Lamb likewise inappropriately applies classical narratives, keeping no one near enough to help him see his mistake. For Lamb, this brings about not only his own death, but also that of a young boy.

While McCandless's imbalance of autonomy and commitment parallels that of Lamb, Lamb's mental disposition emphasizes his particularly strong need for others. His mental state becomes clearer as the novel progresses. Investigation of his mental instability illustrates his need for social commitment and simultaneously delineates the forces which disable him when isolated. Early in the novel, Brother Benedict's intuition about Lamb's character is easy to miss, but even the narrator's descriptions of him and his inner thoughts foreshadow his mental patterns of instability.

The first of these patterns is Lamb's impulsiveness, exemplified by his unplanned declaration of his intentions to leave, followed immediately by a highly emotional response:

When he said it he was amazed. He hadn't even voiced the thought aloud to himself. It had been there for a long time in the back of his mind but it had all seemed so difficult, the problems were so insuperable, that he never gave it any real consideration. Now that his father could no longer be hurt it seemed different, but that he should be saying it now to Brother Benedict of all people, left him slightly breathless. (12-13)

Taken alone, such a bold act might be considered desirable for the sake of Lamb's emancipation, but soon his need for societal fetters becomes apparent. Lamb's impulsive action and thrill-seeking become increasingly problematic.

The second pattern, Lamb's pride, adds additional danger to his autonomy, as he fails to submit his will to any human or spiritual authority. Most people "rebalance their autonomy and their commitments, usually in a way that honors what they were before" (Bruner 84). Lamb, then, expresses great pride by abandoning real commitment to others and obsessing over his individuality. On a mandated walk on the beach, Benedict asks Lamb if his desire to leave surfaced with or before the death of his father and furthermore encourages Lamb to "spend some time on your knees in prayer for guidance on these matters. Discover what is tempting you" (26-27). Instead, however, Lamb thinks of his "different plans" for the next day—kidnapping (27). Rather than submitting to Benedict's advice or God's guidance, Lamb mentally reasserts his own intended action, returning to the narrative he has already written for himself.

Apparently, such pride has long been a problem in Lamb, as he remembers his Novice Master who "constantly played the humility card," telling them "Pride, Brothers is one of the worst sins of all" and instructs them to yield their wills in order to find their true selves (90). But "Michael found nothing at the end of the process of self-whittling.

He had no true self" and told the Novice Master so. His reply was that Lamb had "not gone far enough," telling Lamb, "There is a hard core in you that resists you giving up your will" (90). Really, what Lamb finds at the end of his search for his true self is only pride. He concludes he has no true self, which is dangerous enough, but the Novice Master implies that his pride is so ingrained in his true core that they are indistinguishable.

When Benedict recognizes Lamb's pride, he obliquely advises humility by associating simple people with obedience and humility (23). Benedict tests Lamb's critical thinking by telling him a story about calligraphy which illustrates obedience, then asking Lamb if he believes the story. When Lamb responds in the affirmative, asking why he should not believe it, Benedict responds, "Yes, why shouldn't you?... As I said, it is a virtue associated with simple people. You should not have so much difficulty with it" (24). Benedict's pairing of obedience with humility in the context of "simple people" suggests not only that Lamb cannot or does not think for himself, made clear in an earlier passage (14), but also that because he is so simple-minded, his humility should guide him. In other words, one who cannot think for himself should yield to others who can think for him. Benedict implicitly offers to think for Lamb, something he already does as Superior.

Lamb's simplistic thinking, as Benedict notes, can also be idealistic. The Superior recognizes Lamb's "text-book idealism," which he says he admires but has "rarely seen it work" (14). After Benedict asserts his abrasive vision for the Home to teach boys "a little of God and a lot of fear," he tells Lamb, "There is no room here for your soft-

centered, self-centered idealism" (14). While Benedict's power plays are hardly model behavior, his intuition of Lamb's character is accurate. Lamb believes in his own good intentions. His resulting blindness to practicality, other's needs, and his own faults prove fatal once free of societal tethers.

Such mental dispositions as Lamb's evident impulsiveness, emotionalism, pride, simplistic thinking, and idealism can be counteracted by commitment to others. Indeed, while Lamb remains in the borstal, under the crooked Brother Benedict, under the general rules of society, and the moral obligations of the church, he commits no great evil. A person whose autonomy looks like Lamb's must remain socially tethered to others to prevent disaster. Otherwise, as *Lamb* illustrates, isolation can and will unhinge such a person. Lamb's seeds of delusion prosper because of the isolation necessitated by the initial decision to take the boy. Because he has kidnapped Owen, the two must live in hiding and create new names and identities. The decision effectively severs them from honest community with others. From the point of his removal from community, hope for Lamb's normalcy and healthy modes of thinking is essentially lost, though proper reassessment could restore him to community and thus to a healthy life.

Without this community, one may likely confuse his or her own destruction as a victory. It is quite possible McCandless may well have considered himself the victor for achieving pure autonomy at whatever cost (Bruner 79). Similarly, Lamb consistently views himself as protagonist in his own narrative. Whereas "[d]ecorum keeps most of us from the sorts of wild adventure in self-making that brought Christopher McCandless

down" (Bruner 84), neither McCandless nor Lamb have the community which might have otherwise secured them to less destructive action.

Lamb's pride in the context of isolation leads to what Richard Russell terms "delusional self-worship" (47). Russell makes a convincing case for how this describes Lamb, so I will not attempt to recreate the argument here. Instead, however, I will offer a reading of Lamb's self-worship through the media theory put forth by Thomas de Zengotita, and then explore Lamb's treatment of mass media in the novel to illustrate how it affects him before returning to discussion of his need for community and finally his need for a narrative of success.

In *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Our World and the Way We Live in It*, a nonacademic but insightful consideration of the media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Thomas de Zengotita illustrates how the media breeds narcissism through the "flattery of being perpetually addressed" (259). One chapter's overview contains, "*The Nietzschean Overman turns out to be a really nice person. He is you. You are so special that you should ask yourself this: how would it feel to make love to your own clone?*" (249). With this concept the author dramatizes the narcissism engendered in modern representational media. In Zengotita's opinion, modernity aims to make possible "humanly created options that endow ordinary people with entitlements no mortal in history, no matter how exalted, could ever have assumed before" (266). To illustrate such a process, he asserts, "Once again it is all about you. The reader, the viewer, the customer is the ultimate center of the represented universe. Those in the limelight come and go in accordance with the dictates of your attention. They need you much more

than you need them" (260). Thus, Lamb's interaction with the media, presumably sharply increased once he leaves the Home, drastically encourages his narcissism. Benjamin Griffith agrees when he writes MacLaverty's "characters are also trapped in the pop-culture present, with neither a sense of the past nor even an overall view of current history" (334). Within this limited perspective, Lamb exercises power over the media's presence and bends its messages to his suit his self-narrative—and no one challenges this power since he is essentially alone.

Indeed, the illusion of the world revolving around oneself promotes uniqueness as a kind of authority. The result, Zengotita argues, is that people become

authorized to create your own vision and philosophy, to cobble one together out of whatever notions strike your fancy as you browse...And the result?... You know how it is. Name a topic and, presto, everyone has an opinion, everyone can speculate, everyone has a "take," as we say nowadays—implicitly acknowledging that no one has time for much more than that—so, what the heck, mine could be as good as the next one. (259)

The unearned authority of instant expertise only encourages a sense of one's own value, in Lamb's case, extreme (though veiled) pride. As discussed earlier, he does not fully consider Benedict's perspective of the kidnapping before he commits to the action. Taken to the extreme, made increasingly possible by the media, such narcissism can certainly lead to the "delusional self-worship" of which Russell writes, and which Zengotita illustrates humorously in his chapter introduction.

Zengotita's observations come to life in much of Lamb's treatment of mass media in the novel, either to distract himself from his reality or to encourage destructive action. First, Lamb controls the presence of the media by buying a radio (60) to reconnect

himself figuratively to the “familiar” voices (60) of home, and also to hear if his narrative is being shared publicly—if he and Owen are on the news (61). Because of their criminal status, they are subject to the radio, for which they find the precise angle, maximize the volume, and wait (61). Later, when Lamb hears a broadcast saying the search for Owen is moving to London (71), his living arrangement is threatened. Lamb’s dependence on the radio briefly takes over. Without this regard, he controls its entrances and exits, its particular message by adjusting the station according to his and Owen’s current desires for “background music” (99), social distraction (103), or homey comfort (126). A brief list of other media used by Lamb and Owen as distraction or emotional denial include the violent entertainment of Piccadilly (82-83), the emotional escapism of Owen’s cowboy persona (44, 76, 144), the distraction of the hotel television (116, 123), and the background Musak in the hotel bar (118). In these various roles, the media simultaneously informs and is affected by Lamb’s narrative.

One particular case of the radio’s inadvertent encouragement of destruction begins when Lamb tries to get the Irish hotel maid out of their room when their conversation leads her to become suspicious. The Beatles’ song, “All You Need is Love” comes on (103), and only pages later Lamb’s language of self-sacrificial love begins to appear and multiply. While at mass with Owen, Lamb tells himself “Love was what governed all he did” (111), reflecting that his love for his father had kept him in the Brothers (112). Moments later, Lamb reaches ultimate pride in similar language, trying to convince himself “God is love,” but concluding instead, “I am love” (112). The title character in *Cal*, as critics have noticed, despite his loss of faith, also “continues to

construe his plight in terms of religious concepts and imagery linked to Matt Talbot and to self-mortifying, medieval hermits," (Haslam 43) even in terms of himself as Christ (Russell 19). Lamb similarly asserts that "thousands of saviours like his father" could keep the world going with their love if God ceased to exist, repeating again, "I am love" (113). This language, certainly encouraged if not instigated by his interpretation of the Beatles' song, appears in the final pages: "What he planned was for love; what he planned was a photograph, a capturing of the stillness of the moment of the boy's happiness. Irreversible and therefore eternal..." (147). Lamb's final plan is to create a piece of media with "love only," by freezing Owen's moment of ecstasy before an epileptic fit triggered in love. "All You Need is Love" does not advocate murder, and yet Lamb's exercised authority over the media, in addition to his twisted internalization, leads to Owen's double drowning.

Lamb crucially chooses to push the maid out of the room with the noise of the radio, at the same time distancing himself from potential community and encouraging his own delusion. The woman takes a genuine interest in the "O'Learys" because of their Irish nationality. She comes bearing towels, and upon Lamb's thanks, she exclaims, "Ah, you are Irish...When Mrs. Finlay said there was a Mr. O'Leary in Number Ten needing towels, I said to myself he's sure to be Irish. What part are you from? No, wait a minute. Say something and let me guess" (74). She speaks kindly to them and returns later with genuine concern which quickly turns into suspicion when Lamb acts strangely. This potential if small community he might have with this other Irish adult in London is ruined when Lamb tries to put on his new identity as smoking

father of Owen from Swords. His narrative in effect takes over and begins to protect itself by using media to push away the people who might otherwise be able to help prevent the planned murder.

The helpfulness of community in Lamb's life has already been proven in his decorum with Benedict and desire to honor his father's wishes. The bounds set by the Home and by Benedict appear to have kept Lamb acting appropriately. Bruner's discussion of social commitment as a sort of tether to proper behavior can help explain how this works. As long as Lamb is a part of a human community, the expectations of society help control his actions. For example, when "[a]sked such a direct question by his Superior, Brother Sebastian [Lamb] felt he had to answer" (9). Only later in this conversation, and only unexpectedly, does Lamb say anything in opposition to Benedict. Since, also, Lamb expresses a sense of freedom from the Brotherhood as a result of his father's death (112), his respect for his father has likewise controlled his actions. When, however, he leaves the Home with Owen and must live in hiding, Lamb's responsibility to others disappears. His only remaining link is to a young boy who relies on him completely. Lamb's additional lack of faith in God removes even the spiritual authority or commitment which might guide him. As he proves with his actions in the novel, Lamb is unable to properly think for himself or to generate positive visions of his future. Benedict's early insults foreshadow these inabilities while Lamb's isolation exacerbates them. In fact, once unleashed, Lamb's mental patterns ultimately lead to Owen's murder by encouraging false interpretations of narratives.

Lamb's need for a narrative of success, combined with these limitations together bring out the tragedy at the end of the novel. Lamb's inability to discern properly, paired with narrative's ability to inform action, yields a destructive power. Almost constantly in the novel Lamb's experience is mediated by narratives in such a way that much of Lamb's negative behavior originates in one of his choice narratives. For instance, Lamb looks to his father's example for how to parent the boy he takes into his care. Throughout the novel, Lamb's nostalgic reveries of his father come to life in reality with Owen, like when he says "Stiff elbows" at the football match (87 and 91) and fluffs Owen's pillow like he and presumably his father had done for his mother (99). Unfortunately, Lamb sometimes misapplies his father's example. Both men enact the "mercy killing" of a seizing creature with his bare hands: his father with ill rabbits (86) and Lamb with Owen (150). Lamb also imitates his father's neglectful devotion to his wife, forsaking the farm (86) by trying to devote himself to the boy's rescue, forsaking all other human community (33) and ultimately the boy's life.

Lamb's simplistic and idealistic thinking prevents him from discerning, like most people can, the proper cultural values implicit in narratives. He consistently fails to consider the intent behind some of his recurring narratives, which especially fails him since

[w]e more often tell stories to forewarn than to instruct. And because of this, stories are a culture's coin and currency. For culture is, figuratively, the maker and enforcer of what is expected, but it also, paradoxically, compiles, even slyly treasures, transgressions. Its myths and its folktales, its dramas and its pageants memorialize both its norms and notable violations of them. (Bruner 15)

This understanding that not all narratives are to be modeled in reality, that many are instead models of undesirable behavior, enables most people to respond appropriately. Narratives, whether folk myths, radio broadcasts, or sermons, contain implicit messages about right and wrong action and are thus meant to affect a person's actions. One may turn to an established narrative to understand a new situation and proper response. Lamb, for example, tries to play the part of a married man when he buys the wedding band at the jewelers and must enact a familiar story about losing his ring, complete with an irate wife (30-31). Yet, with his established mental limitations and patterns, he often cannot enact the proper response to a narrative of warning. His narrative creations become misappropriations of virtues and vices since he fails to think critically about the models he follows.

Lamb imitates not only his father's example but those of fictional fathers as well. As Russell has pointed out in his chapter on father and son relationships in MacLaverty's *Lamb*, Lamb's situation mirrors that of Daedalus. Narrative theory suggests, beyond Russell's observations, the narrative of the Greek myth is contributing directly to the psychology and thus reality of Lamb. In other words, the likeness of these narratives serves not only as a narrative device for MacLaverty, but additionally affects the character's psychology as they come into contact. This is not to suggest Lamb's conscious imitation of Daedalus but rather the effects of the narrative on the one he is building as father to Owen. Russell suggests Lamb is "seemingly oblivious to the role he is gradually assuming" (45) and later that though he and Owen are unaware of these roles they "nonetheless may be guided by them and thus unconsciously heading

for a fall" (45). Although Russell discusses parallels between the fictional and real father-son relationships in the novel, I would suggest further that the particular narratives directly and strongly affect Lamb's psyche, and therefore his actions.

As with the Beatles' "All You Need is Love," this Greek myth's unfortunate juxtaposition with Lamb's life encourages him to enact the plan; in fact, it may be responsible for creating it. When Lamb and Owen read Bulfinch's version of the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus, the two begin to discuss Owen's epilepsy. Owen says, "This has happened before...the story of the boy falling into the sea, the noise of the pipes, you sitting with your head in your hands" to which Lamb tells him to lie down and asks, "You're not going to have an attack are you?" (79). Not only does Owen's *déjà vu* link the myth to his condition, but also his mentioning of the pipes likewise calls up Lamb's memory of Owen's fit at the Home when pipes burned his legs during a seizure (51-52). Later, when Owen has a fit at the football (soccer) match, Lamb views the scene with ocean imagery and drowning. Owen's arms are "waving," his face "blue-white" and "bobbing on the stretcher," then "[g]radually the boy quietened, the intensity went out of his movements until eventually he lay still." Meanwhile the "crowd swayed and roared and chanted at the game," and later Lamb "could hear the crowd, muted like the rising and falling of the sea" (94). Lamb's image of Owen as a fish flopping returns to him later (95), strengthening still the connection between his fits and drowning. While much of this process is unconscious, Lamb's sleepless nights and high stress of living in hiding produce the "glimmerings of a plan...terrible in its implications," (104) but nonetheless a product of narrative connections he makes in his waking life.

Yet another fatherly narrative inappropriately played out by Lamb is that of Abraham and Isaac. The biblical narrative of Abraham's nearly sacrificing his only son to God first appears in conversation with Brother Benedict. Benedict says, "Abraham's problem...was that he saw God's will *too* clearly. The way an Ulster Protestant would—and that frightens me" (24). Benedict's utterance, while loaded with political and theological implications, is meant as a warning to Lamb regarding the impulse to commit murder. In the end of the Genesis account, after all, God offers Abraham a way out, a ram to sacrifice instead (Gen. 22:13). The Abraham narrative appears later in the alias Lamb adopts at the hotel, M. Abraham, a name which appears on the clerk's magazine cover: "'An Act of Love' by Garth Abrahams" (45). When Lamb takes on the name, he opens himself to the narrative in a way, though the "plan" comes to him when he is under another alias, O'Leary. Nonetheless, the narrative of Abraham and Isaac carries forward, first with the talk of sacrifice involved in the plan (34, 132), then with Owen's unawareness of being "spared the plan" when Lamb temporarily sees a way to avoid it by living with Haddock (124). Peter Mahon writes of how Cal has "associations with both Oedipus and Christ...[and] seems destined to bear the responsibilities for all political violence in Northern Ireland" (72). Lamb as well can be associated with both a biblical (Abraham) and classical (Daedalus) figure, resulting in his "fated" responsibility for violence, in this case upon Owen as the son figure. Just as Abraham changes his name and finally and miraculously receives a son late in life, Lamb also changes his name and appears to be a father of sorts.

Importantly, however, Lamb changes his own name and takes the boy himself. His motive to kill the boy, he likewise claims, comes from within him rather than from God (106). In the final scene on the beach, the setting of the sand dunes in Donegal (145-46) recall Abraham's narrative again, as Abraham was directed to a mountain in the region of Moriah (Gen. 22:2). Allusion to Abraham's difficult journey with Isaac appears as well when "Michael put his arm around Owen's shoulders and for the length of the walk neither of them spoke" (149). Finally, however, because Lamb's self-narrative already has its ending written in the Daedalus story or alternatively written as Abraham's but without the potential of God's new message, he cannot take the second chance to spare Owen who wakes after the first failed drowning attempt (150). Lamb "felt himself funneled towards the act he had decided upon, but prayed to God that something would arrest it—even at the last moment" (148). However, when Owen gasps, apparently still alive, Lamb "lower[s] him into the water again" (150). In an unfortunate way, Lamb finally rewrites the Abrahamic narrative where God provides an animal for sacrifice at the last moment, with the tragic ending of the Bulfinch myth where Icarus flies too close to the sun with the wax wings his father has created for him which melt and leave him to fall to the sea. For Owen, Isaac's redemptive ending becomes Icarus's fall.

Finally, as illustrated in these imitations of fatherly narratives, Lamb needs a narrative of success to follow in order to escape the labyrinth of living in hiding. Bruner offers two cautionary tales which highlight in the medical world how much power lies in a narrative of success. In the second of these tales, Bruner shares how "gravely

injured children or children recovering from disabling illnesses” can heal partly through narrative.

One group at the University of Southern California in the School of Medicine has taken up the study of what their colleagues at Columbia University call “narrative medicine.” The anthropological research done on these children suggests, staggeringly, that treatment is not enough, but “There must also be a narrative of possible recovery, even a fanciful one that casts the child-patient, the therapist, and a parent in a Wild West story or a detective drama... A shared narrative is what matters” (Bruner 106-07). In other words, a child could, medically speaking, have impeccable care and hopeful progress, but may give up without a narrative of success to follow. The Columbia medical professionals who paid attention to only the “facts” found consequently “some patients gave up hope, quit the fight for life” (Bruner 105). In narrative medicine, a caretaker is responsible “to listen to what the patient has to say, and then figure out what to do about it” (106). If a person’s self narrative has the biological and psychological power to change or end one’s life, then such narratives must be taken seriously.

In this case, and undoubtedly the majority of cases, this process happens through the community which Lamb has eschewed. If Lamb could manage to honestly reassess his guiding principles and thus his self-narrative, then he may have a chance at a successful life. Since his earlier commitment to his father initiates a commitment to the Brothers which proves successful for Lamb for many years, and since the dangers of pure autonomy for Lamb’s mentality are illustrated in Christopher McCandless, the only

way for Lamb to become a productive member of society is by reconnecting with community. Commitment to others will temper his pride, offer new narratives with positive endings, and challenge Lamb's dangerous thinking. So long as Lamb submits his will to others and maintains a healthy sense of self, he can succeed. At this late point, however, honest reconnection with society will require his confession to murder and necessitate time in prison.

In the end, whatever hope glimmers for Michael Lamb in one sense is overwhelmed by Lamb's existential predicament. Whereas sociopathy is "the absence of a sense of responsibility to the requirements of social being" (Bruner 69), or selfhood without community, Lamb eventually feels a responsibility to mankind in the form of guilt. In key passages, Lamb desires community, desires to justify himself to another person (139), and sees the evil in his actions (152). He even begins to recognize his own delusion at the very end of the novel, discovering, "The good that I do is the evil that results" (152). Unlike a sociopath who suffers no regret, Lamb feels "gutted...as if his insides and his soul had been burned out" (152). He reflects the misfortune of his life, his lack of discernment, how his "pure loving simple ideal...had gone foul on him, turned inevitably into something evil" (152). At the novel's close, Lamb recognizes the evil that results from what he thought was good.

However, Lamb's concern is not primarily with right and wrong, but rather with his own existence. Regarding such motivations, Charles Taylor writes in *Sources of the Self*, "The existential predicament in which one fears condemnation is quite different from the one where one fears, above all, meaninglessness. The dominance of the latter

perhaps defines our age" (18). Taylor, as a contemporary of MacLaverty's and Lamb's, enlightens the cultural mindset of this character. Fragments of his delusion of inevitability remain. He thinks of himself as a victim of fate, concluding he "had no luck. No faith. And now, no love" (152). He thinks of evil as "inevitable." Bruner reflects that almost all autobiographies (written self-narratives) contain a turning point, a moment of reassessment, where the author will write, "It was a new me..." (83). Bruner stresses the importance of reassessing one's actions and narratives against new circumstances to make sure one's principles still work. Taylor similarly argues, "We have to move forward and back to make a real assessment" (48), and Lamb fails to work back in his mind to discover where he went wrong. Instead, he believes his existence was unlucky, and therefore has no real guilt. As we have seen, the failure to reassess, to have occasional turning points, when one principle ceases to be helpful and becomes instead dangerous, leads to destruction.

Lamb takes on several tragic narratives, many of which end in drowning, killing, or have only vaguely or supernaturally positive endings. As he struggles to think of a way out of his plan, he grasps for models to follow, but unfortunately, only despairing images recur in his mind. As Russell points out, Lamb's role as Daedalus prefigures their fall (45). The hope at the end of Abraham's story is overpowered by other narratives in Lamb's mind, ones which crowd out community and hope, as is seen in Lamb's flailing attempts to escape the plan via Haddock and Maguire. Because of Lamb's mental disposition, his especial reliance on the reason of others, and the

narratives which attach to him, he is unable to imagine his own happy ending.

According to theory of the narrative creation of self, then, Lamb's failure makes sense.

How does this psychological aspect color MacLaverty's *Lamb* and his other work? To Gary Brienzo, the complexity with which the author treats his characters is evidence of "compassion for his characters" (77). As noted in the previous chapter, critics often note the "slice-of-life" quality in MacLaverty's work, whether they like it or not. Aidan Higgins, for example, criticized the prevalence of bodily fluids and hygienic concerns in his review. I have shown in that chapter that the gritty accuracy of these bodies speaks to their humanity, a crucial point in MacLaverty's opposition to violence against those bodies. In *Lamb*, as well, MacLaverty intimately describes Lamb's mind, his thoughts, and his tendencies. Brienzo sees this as a compassion for his characters, and I am convinced of this as well—and it speaks further of MacLaverty's connection to people, to his neighbors and their worth.

Reading *Lamb* in terms of the title character's internal, psychological struggle to create a positive self-narrative allows us to see MacLaverty's own mental struggle to understand his world, specifically the violence in his community of Belfast. My thesis illuminates how these short story collections and this novel strive to understand the nature of the author's world. MacLaverty has compassion for his characters, which I believe is simply a byproduct of his compassion for humanity and the Northern Irish community specifically. Perhaps MacLaverty's search for a successful narrative of reconciliation make way for a realized hope for many to escape the violence in their communities and relationships.

This thesis, aside from Russell's monograph, is the first to give sustained critical attention to these early works of Bernard MacLaverty, where we can see a clear development in the author's considerations of violence in terms of the body and mind. In both chapters, I explain how the author gives a cautionary tale by exploring the unfortunate consequences of patterns he sees in his neighbors and himself. Whether through the corpse of a dog, a son, or a bruise on the knee, MacLaverty provides embodiment of these patterns in order to warn his readers of these consequences. Next, he provides a sustained exploration of one man's mind which ultimately leads to the tragic murder of a young boy. In the midst of it all, as we have seen in *A Time to Dance*, a model for bereavement, for the struggle to imagine how it could change. All in all, this thesis provides three major explorations of the same principle in MacLaverty's early works: within rich narratives, MacLaverty embeds bodily and psychological rhetoric against violence.

While the fiction, my analysis, and the author are more complex than this statement, it remains the unifying thread in this study. I cannot emphasize enough my respect for Bernard MacLaverty and his work, and part of that results from his ecumenical approach to such unimaginable violence as he has experienced. This is not to limit the scope of his or my meaning, nor to impose any political agenda on either one. Rather, this exploration aims not only to provide a multifaceted reading of these texts but also to call for critical attention. Through this thesis, I hope to introduce MacLaverty's work to a wider audience that might embrace these narratives in a way that changes their considerations of bodies, minds, and violence.

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