

## ABSTRACT

### Through the Lens of the Land: Changing Identity in the Novels of Bernard MacLaverty

Jordan Leigh Gibson, M.A.

Director: Richard Rankin Russell, Ph.D.

Many critics, like Oona Frawley, believe the land of Ireland has the unique power to connect the collective Irish conscience to the past and is often a rallying cry to garner support for the freedom of Ireland. MacLaverty explores this cultural mindset in *Lamb* (1980) and *Cal* (1983) and eventually refutes it as a healthy and effective way for Northern Irish Catholics to identify themselves and find purpose in their lives. *Grace Notes* (1997), MacLaverty's third novel, eschews the romantic view of the land, and allows Catherine McKenna to explore the possibilities of finding an international identity through her connection with foreign lands although she still finds strength through her connection with the land. Northern Ireland, it seems, could not provide contemporary citizens with a hope and a future; therefore, they must look towards a transnational identity open to outside influence while being rooted in the local landscape.

Through the Lens of the Land:  
Changing Identity in the Novels of Bernard Maclaverty

by

Jordan Leigh Gibson, M.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of English

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Diana Vitanza, Ph.D., Interim Chairperson

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

Approved by the Thesis Committee

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Richard R. Russell, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Jay B. Losey, Ph.D.

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W. David Clinton, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
August 2008

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my readers, Dr. Jay Losey and Dr. David Clinton, for their willingness to go above and beyond what is required while working with me on this project. Aspiring scholars like myself only succeed because of professors like you who are generous with your time and intellect.

Dr. Richard Rankin Russell introduced to me the beautiful works of Bernard MacLaverty, guided me through an in-depth study of his novels and short stories, and graciously agreed to mentor me as I wrote this thesis. I am extremely grateful for his willingness to sit down with me whenever I had questions or lost confidence in my ability to successfully complete this endeavor. I asked Dr. Russell to chair my thesis because he accepts nothing but the best from his students. Thank you for not letting me down and proving me correct.

Finally, I have to acknowledge and thank Bernard MacLaverty. It is rare that one finds an author who enraptures her mind and soul as completely as he does. His piercing stories and subtle prose keep me coming back to his work time after time. I earnestly look forward to the publication of his next book.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

*No matter how complicated the story of the present-day Irish, the present has grown out of the soil; it begins with people living from the land. The standard image of Ireland is rolling green farmland dotted with little white houses and shaggy sheep. To many, this is the real Ireland, the place of origin.*

*William Flanagan*

In his recent book, *Ireland Now: Tales of Change from the Global Island*, William Flanagan begins his chapter on Irish farming with the above observation; however, this image is only part of the reality of contemporary Ireland. While the land is and has been connected with individuals, families, communities, and the nation as a whole, it has also experienced many changes as the modern city has surpassed the romanticized rural countryside in status. For many Irish in the island's infancy, farming was the way of life, providing both sustenance and shelter. As the island developed, the land also provided an identity for both those Irish who farmed and those who worked in the blossoming industry of the north. Because the Irish were so closely connected to the land, when Ireland was colonized by the British, the Irish experienced undeniable feelings of displacement. Michael Storey, however, has argued that, "Description or mention of the landscape and places dear to the oppressed people helps

reconnect them to the land, thus overcoming the sense of displacement that the colonial power has created in them" (33). The struggle between England and Ireland, the oppressor and the oppressed, has consistently been a theme in Irish literature since the first of multiple periodic British forays into Ireland during the tenth century; the land, in all its definitions, has also been an important theme in Irish literature because it provided both consolation to a distressed people and preservation of the individual and the nation through memories of the past. To address these very real issues, some Irish authors have chosen to invoke the past, rather than focusing only on the present, as a way to inspire the Irish people both to endure and resist the colonization of the island and more recently, the Catholic Northern Irish to endure and resist the violence of the Northern Irish Troubles.

Oona Frawley has recently explored how twentieth-century Irish authors like Yeats, Synge, Joyce, Beckett, Heaney, and Boland use a combined sense of land and nostalgia for both political and cultural goals, although in very different ways. She begins her book on Irish pastoral literature with the observation that "it has long been commonplace to remark upon Irish literature's preoccupation with place, nature and landscape," reinforcing the importance of the land to the Irish and to Irish literature (1). She argues that Irish authors have endowed the land with deep meaning, turning what was a simple image into a complex, powerful picture, capable of telling a story by itself: "nature and landscape

become signifiers, lenses through which it is possible to examine cultural and historical developments” (1).

In this thesis, I attempt to use the lens of land, of nature, and of landscape to examine the impact of Northern Ireland and its Troubles (roughly 1969-1994) on the novels of Northern Irish author Bernard MacLaverty (b. 1942).

MacLaverty works within a modified Irish pastoral relationship with the land and sense of nostalgia in his first two novels, *Lamb* (1980) and *Cal* (1983). In these novels, MacLaverty appears to be looking for a way to explain the current Troubles using the existing political and social structures, although he criticizes the violent methods of some of the political groups, specifically Sinn Fein, and the terrorist groups like the IRA. In his third novel, *Grace Notes* (1997), MacLaverty explores the possibility and effectiveness of transnational identity as a way to help begin the healing process within Northern Ireland. It appears that during the fourteen-year novelistic hiatus between *Cal* and *Grace Notes*, MacLaverty realized the Northern Ireland of his youth was no longer an attainable goal, and that the peace Northern Ireland had been searching for since partition in 1922 would have to be found in a different way. He seems to abandon reclaiming a pastoral view of Northern Ireland, as did some of his predecessors, like James Joyce and Samuel Beckett with the Republic of Ireland, and instead begins to look for a way to provide a paradigm of reconciliation



between Catholics and Protestants, mirroring the political progress during the late twentieth-century through a more open identity derived from multiple international influences. By looking outwards at the larger global community, MacLaverty suggests that cosmopolitan aspects of the works of Northern Irish Catholic and Protestant artists might inspire them to open lines of communication between themselves, possibly reducing the violence of the Troubles.

According to Frawley, engagement with the Irish pastoral tradition developed the nation's identity. Citizens elevated the past by a sense of nostalgia and focused on Irish myths with themes of honor and nobility so that they did not have to feel like second-class citizens ruled by English lords and dukes. Myths bestowed a greater pride in the Irish people's culture and history. Holding onto a past, even a past that was consciously altered, provided a sense of stability and continuity in an ever-changing environment. By focusing on and celebrating the land, the Irish could create a separate identity from their British colonizers. However, this identity was often imagined, created instead of natural. Stereotypes were often present and the reality of rural life, for example the brutality of animal slaughter, was glossed over (Frawley 4). Lawrence Buell affirms this criticism of the pastoral in general by defining it, ironically, as "a (re)turn to a less urbanized, a more "natural" state of existence" (31). Both

Frawley and Buell recognize that the images in pastoral writings are not true pictures of the rural; instead, they are the creations of individuals or an entire society for a particular purpose. Benedict Anderson believes this creation of identity is not specific or special to Ireland. According to him, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falseness/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). Irish authors used the land specifically as a means to create this sense of identity, and its power came through evocations of the nostalgia connected to the land. Representing the land became a tool of cultural and political definition for Irish nationalists. As Ireland became more and more colonized, imagined evocations of the land became increasingly important and were often used as a rallying cry for what the nationalists believed was a true Irish identity, connecting the past with the present and giving a sense of solidarity and hope. Even after Irish independence in 1922, Ireland, especially *Bord Failte*, the Irish Tourist Board, often holds tight to rural images that have assumedly served their purpose as a way to move forward in modern society: "The pace of change in modern-day Ireland seems to have forced a continued reliance on the idea of a rural nation" in order to make change more acceptable to the people of both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (Frawley 137).

Other critics have acknowledged this relationship between the past, the land, and Irish identity that Frawley identifies. For example, John Wilson Foster, although never directly stating that he himself is nostalgic, quietly supports this questionable connection of nostalgia for the past in Irish fiction by saying that “Irish fiction is a descendant of Irish mythic tale” (30). One example is Seamus Heaney’s poem “Sweeney Astray” which recast the mythic medieval Irish work “Buile Suibhne.” Continuing the discussion of the importance of Irish myths for current literature, Stephen Sayers insists that Irish myths do not fall under the normal, modern definition of myth, which implies falsehood and fantasy; instead, they draw upon the supernatural as the basis of power for their influence upon Irish culture:

Older definitions present myth as 'revealed truth'. The word 'myth' derives from the Greek word *muthos*, which means 'speech', that is to say, the Words of the Gods—divine expression or divine knowledge. Here, then, the term 'myth' connotes divine or quintessential truth and not fallacy. (272)

Sayers believes that myths act as truth for the Irish, providing them with a way in which to live out their lives in a “coherent experience of certain fundamental aspects of everyday life” (273). Myths are used to examine the past and glean wisdom, encouragement, or identity. Sayers insists a major reason why myth became so important to Irish culture is that “myth does not come before blood; it comes *OUT* of blood. Myth is the language of life at the extremes—all that is left

when ordinary language fails to articulate the extraordinary" (276). Irish life was often tumultuous as different factions warred since the settlement of the island. Sayers also asserts that myth is strongly reminiscent of Romanticism (274), linking it to the sense of nostalgia Frawley believes is such a notable characteristic of Irish literature. Irish myth was the source of many works by revivalist writers of the Republic like W.B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, and Lady Gregory and more recently, Seamus Heaney of Northern Ireland, who all attempt to create a vision, and, consequently, an identity of Ireland.

Foster connects Irish myth, contemporary Irish fiction, and Irish identity, asserting that "the fiction writer's preoccupation with place is a preoccupation with the past without which Irish selfhood is apparently inconceivable" (30). Frawley's statement that "rural Ireland [was] the real Ireland" (111) supports Foster's observation that without pastoral notions of place, and, therefore, the past, a "true" Irish identity could not be formulated. Without an identity, many characters in Irish literature flounder, eventually self-destructing because of their lack of identity and subsequent feelings of futility. Bernard MacLaverty, in his earlier works, seems to operate within this belief; in *Lamb*, for instance, Michael Lamb consistently tries to embrace his Irish identity while in London by sharing where he is from with other Irish citizens he encounters; yet he cannot successfully adapt in England, forcing him to come home to Ireland. In *Cal*, Cal

McCluskey, although he rarely leaves Northern Ireland physically, cannot truly connect to his obligatory nationalist Irish identity despite his attempt to fit in through his similar physical appearance to young IRA members. However, the self-destruction of characters without a definite identity does not always occur. When characters welcome a transnational identity instead of fight against it, they often times flourish. Frawley suggests as much by noting that when characters, like Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* reject the Irish sense of place for an increasingly global sense of place, they are seen as less Irish than their more traditional counterparts (Frawley 115-6). Interestingly, these modern characters do not self-destruct. Dedalus and Bloom embrace their new sense of transnational identity and thrive. In his later novels, MacLaverty embraces this expansive sense of Irish identity to include different aspects of Irish culture and directly repudiates the outdated belief that “rurality equals Irishness” through the cosmopolitan characters of Catherine McKenna in *Grace Notes* and Martin Brennan in *The Anatomy School*.

Because the land is so important to Irish identity and literature, it is vital that readers have a solid understanding of the political and religious identities of the Irish island. Although sharing the physical island called Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland cannot be spoken of synonymously. Not only are these two states governed separately, their populations are

comprised of at least two very different cultural groups. The Republic of Ireland (henceforth referred to solely as Ireland) consists primarily of Catholics and has traditionally been nationalist in political views and tendencies, although there are varying degrees of belief concerning these views and actions among individuals. Northern Ireland has a majority Protestant population that has traditionally been pro-union toward the United Kingdom, although there is a sizable nationalistic Catholic minority flourishing in Northern Ireland. Significant historical debates during the beginning of the nineteenth century focused mainly on the differences of these two groups. These two entities do share a troubled and complex past, but since the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the creation of the Irish Free State, they have diverged and taken two different paths. After the Treaty in 1922, the two states actually had little political interaction with each other. For many years after independence, the Irish State focused inward and faced a civil war (1922-1924) as well as the difficulty of establishing a new government separate from the British. In the late 1990s, Britain and Ireland came together to help stop the violence in Northern Ireland and find a lasting compromise for peace in that region.

The land, in discussions of Ireland and especially Northern Ireland, means many things. For example, Seamus Deane uses the term "land" broadly for the terms "territory, land, and soil" (70). Foster describes the land in a more abstract

way, examining the emotions the land evokes: “love and aversion, past and present, self-captivity and attempted self-emancipation” (33). These varying meanings and representations, then, create a confusing and often times frustrating topic. In this thesis, I use several terms to describe and discuss subtopics of what can be broadly termed “the land.” While these terms can be confusing, each definition accentuates a different part of what comprises the land. The land issue in Ireland is complex, never black and white, and the different terms are all interrelated, giving insight into the complex political and cultural history of Ireland, especially the current condition of Northern Ireland. These three definitions grew organically out of my readings of the novels, and I have chosen to define them here on a continuum from concrete to abstract, although all definitions may not be acutely distinct.

The first definition of the land concerns the actual physical land and landscape: the dirt beneath the feet of people, the tract they call their own home. This is the most simple and basic connection to the land because it is the most concrete. Frawley and the English critic Raymond Williams both discuss physical landscapes and the effect that they produce upon readers: the hills, the lakes, the coast lines, the trees, the streams, the meadows. The physical land has often been the object of conflict in Ireland, and therefore, it is vital to understanding the cultural and political nature of the country. From the

beginning attempts at colonization (1182), ownership of the physical land was a means by which to exert power and control over the conquered. The periodic attempts of the British to subdue the Irish continued for roughly six centuries until the Irish people began to mount gradually more successful campaigns against the British. Mike Cronin states that “For some, the agrarian protests of the eighteenth century have been viewed as the first stirrings of nationalist protest within Ireland” (90). Here we begin to see the first blurring of definition; the physical land comprised the livelihood of many Irish citizens, and when the land was mismanaged or taken away by outside forces, the Irish read their loss of land politically. However, this desire to reclaim the land from the British was swiftly stopped with the onset of the Great Famine (1845-1851), which drastically changed the social and political makeup of Ireland. The inability of the physical land to provide for the Irish people enabled the creation of a mythologized Ireland revolting against the presence of the British and influenced the future political and cultural course of Ireland (Cronin 136). The physical land of Ireland provides the foundation for the remaining cultural and political definitions, without which these other definitions would be meaningless.

Closely related to the first definition, the second definition of the land refers to the countryside and nature in general. Although Raymond Williams’s seminal book *The Country and the City* focuses mainly on the English pastoral



tradition and the relationship between English country and city, it provides insight into the complex relationship between the Irish countryside and city as well and is helpful in situating MacLaverty's own work in a larger ecocritical context. Born in the country and writing from a village in East Anglia, Williams states that "the key to its [town and country] analysis is the contrast with the city and the court: here nature, there worldliness" (46). As the colonization of the Irish increased, the British brought more and more of a cosmopolitan character to the settlements. Traditionally, in the country and nature, life was thought of as simple and pure—an attitude that causes part of the nostalgia for a rural Ireland—while life in the city was thought to be more sophisticated, elite, and often corrupt (Williams 46-48). Where families had worked specific tracts of land, absentee landlords now owned those lands, often times managing them from England. The shift from the country to the city, Williams asserts, is seen as "a kind of fall, the true cause and origin of our social suffering and disorder" (96). The city, then, takes on a decidedly negative connotation, while the country takes on a positive, Edenic one, especially in retrospect.

Williams holds, however, that these beliefs about the country and the city are based mainly on appearances and not reality: "The 'ancient stocks,' to which we [the landowners] are sentimentally referred, are ordinarily only those families who had been pressing and exploiting their neighbors rather longer. And the

'intruders', the new men, were entering and intensifying a system which was already established [. . .]" (51). Williams recognizes the ugly truth behind much country life, and yet this realization does not diminish the sense of romanticism he associates with the country. When he goes home to the Black Mountain village he was born in, Williams feels a sense of return, "a recovery of a particular kind of life, which appears, at times, as an inescapable identity, a more positive connection than I have known elsewhere" (84). While the English Williams reverts to an embrace of the rural in England, the American Lawrence Buell expresses concern, however, about romanticizing the rural in English colonies:

Starting in the seventeenth century pastoralism began to become substantialized in locodescriptive poetry (the country house poem, for instance) and, more grandly, in the representation of English colonies as pastoral abodes, first by promoters and explorers, later by the settlers themselves as an article of cultural nationalism [. . .]. This identification had an ambiguous impact on pastoral representation, opening up the possibility of [. . .] reducing the land to a highly selective ideological construct. (32)

Buell, although writing about American literature and land, persuasively argues that problems arose from nationalistic valorization of the American countryside, similar to the situation that developed in Ireland. This "highly selective ideological construct" of romanticized land has the power to become dangerous in its application, as seen by the rhetoric of the IRA, which often depicts the land as a woman in distress. Even though the countryside and nature have different

connotations and associations mainly derived from their connection with people, this definition of land as countryside cannot be disconnected from the definition of land as sheerly physical or as nation.

Another more complex, understanding of the land concerns the abstract, nationalistic idea of an Irish nation. The idea of nation is directly dependent on the land in which its citizens live, and so this concept compliments the other definitions which make up the land. Just because the concept of land as nation is the most abstract does not mean it is less powerful than the other definitions of land. In fact, the conceptions of the land as nation have caused the entire Irish population to spend centuries in debate and violence over its nationhood.

Frawley comments on the power both intentionally and unintentionally given to the pastoral view of Ireland: "Pastoral politics were thus infamously used as the foundations of the [Irish] nation, and would exert a vice grip on Irish culture [. . .] a popular desire that chose to see only the glorification of the rural, and ignored, protested against, or marginalized much else" (104). These images were a driving force in the battle for emancipation from England. The pastoral image was created for nationalistic reasons such as identity, community, and encouragement, but remained even after the Irish achieved their political goals (Frawley 104-105).

Frawley's argument concerning the connection between land and national identity can be extended, if modified, to the citizens of Northern Ireland, both Protestants and Catholics. Brian Graham, an Ulster Protestant, explores the effects of a weak connection between land and nation, which often results in confusion concerning identity. Although Graham believes this confusion caused by a lack of connection with the land is primarily a Protestant problem in Northern Ireland (32-44), I believe that this confusion of identity can be extended to Northern Irish Catholics as well. Both cultural groups are living on the Irish island, but desire to be politically connected to groups that are physically unavailable to them. The majority of Northern Irish Protestants desire to be British subjects and are politically; however, they are separated from the physical island of Britain, which causes another type of displacement. Catholics living in Northern Ireland, after the creation of Republic of Ireland, faced a new challenge living as minorities in a primarily Protestant state. The lack of connection with their immediate Catholic neighbors is accentuated by the lack of connection to the Irish Republic, or to owning land of their own, creating a dual sense of displacement and entitlement. Even Northern Irish Catholics who lived in the countryside, like Seamus Heaney, with their connection to the land in the physical and rural definitions, could not claim full connection with the concept of Northern Ireland as a land, as a nation of their own. This disconnection to the

land as a nation, despite a connection to the land in the physical and country definitions, raised concerns and feelings of isolation in rural Northern Irish Catholics. A people rarely feel complete without a land, which causes an intense desire for a place to call one's own. Northern Irish Catholic citizens cannot be completely Irish when the land they live in is part of the United Kingdom. In this regard, Graham , "In all states, whether nation-states or otherwise, a historically derived and validated iconography of place and ritual is used to encapsulate a people's image of itself and validate its exclusive right to that particular territory" (36). In his first two novels, MacLaverty allows his Catholic Northern Irish characters to attempt a sense of truer nationality and belonging through their connection with the physical land to aid their reclamation of their national identity.

Many twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish writers, like Brian Friel, Seamus Heaney, and Eavan Boland, have incorporated the theme of land into their works, continuing the Irish literary tradition of "engagement with the land, landscape and place [... as] a significant way of expressing cultural, social and political upheaval" (Foster 139). Unlike some Irish writers, MacLaverty does not focus on land as an obvious theme in his novels. While the scope of this thesis cannot encompass all of these writers, a brief summary of how they commonly

employ with the theme of land in their works enables a fuller understanding of MacLaverty's treatment of the land to that of his contemporaries.

Friel's treatment of the land is very similar to Heaney's: traditionally pastoral, romantic, yet very realistic. Friel focuses on both the communal and national implications of the land for the Irish. Richard Rankin Russell identifies a commonality of Friel's sense of place with that of the southern Agrarians of the United States of the 1930s, even stating that Friel supports an agrarian epistemology in his works to contrast urban empirical philosophies. Russell examines the different aspects of rural life in *Translations* (1980), their impact on the play, and the support they lend to Friel's agrarian theory and contrasts them to the rigid, measured characteristics of some of the British characters. He notes that this theme of the effects of modernity on rural Ireland is present in most of Friel's plays and therefore is essential to comprehend in order to understand Friel and his work. Although he does not denounce the urban, Friel believes that reclamation of the rural is valuable to Irish culture and identity in the face of colonization. Rather, Friel calls for an equilibrium between the two so that Ireland may become a balanced, healthy, harmonious nation (106-122).

Seamus Heaney is the most internationally well-known Irish poet; therefore, his treatment of the land is of particular interest. Sidney Burris argues that Heaney's poetry solidly reestablished the deep connection between rurality

and Irish identity and often contains nationalistic undertones (42). Similarly, Frawley works from Burris's thesis and asserts that Heaney writes in the classical pastoral tradition, evoking "the classical pastoral's tension between oppositional states, the most traditional of which is that between country and city" (142), although he does "update the Irish pastoral by writing of the threatening violence in the Northern Ireland of the day" (144). Frawley believes that "what Seamus Heaney refers to as 'the sense of place' in Ireland has been preserved, in many ways, through what I have argued is an Irish pastoral tradition" (136). While his poetry contains traditional pastoral images, Heaney does not allow those images to remain romanticized and instead presents a more realistic view to combat the negative effects of the land's valorization.

Finally, poet Eavan Boland often harshly criticizes the traditional Irish pastoral. Boland explores the relationship between the imagery of land and women to criticize the lack of attention to the role of women in Irish history, literature, and current politics. Frawley applauds Boland's work for the ways in which it "disrupts and in many ways dismantles the gendered nature of Irish pastoral, challenging the direction of the tradition and offering a final window through which to view the Irish attitudes towards land, landscape, place and nature and their relationship to nostalgia" (148-9). Boland could be considered

the “counterpoint” to Heaney and Friel because she takes a less forgiving view toward pastoral imagery and beliefs (Frawley 149).

Exploration of MacLaverty’s own view of what it means to be Irish may provide insight as to why the land is not an obvious theme in his novels like many of his contemporaries. MacLaverty stated in an interview that

I consider myself a writer who came from Ireland. That would be the way I would be comfortable. I would be slightly less comfortable with being an Irish writer, because there is a kind of an overtone or undertone to being an Irish writer [. . .] But to be a writer from Ireland means you could be examining certain concerns that any writer anywhere in the world could be examining. (Gonzales 21)

MacLaverty broke his connection with all three manifestations of the land, like Edna O’Brien and John McGahern, when he left Northern Ireland in 1975, partly to escape from the violence of the Troubles. Some of his characters seem to experience a similar journey through their own search for Irish identity.

However, the land can be a “lens” through which to view the novels and their subject matter (Frawley 1). MacLaverty’s novels illustrate his reworking of Irish pastoral and his attitude towards the debilitating effects of the Northern Irish Troubles. His Catholic characters experience a modified journey through Foster’s “scenarios of locations: the land—the ghetto—suburbia—overseas cosmopolis—return to the land” (34) as they search for their identity as Irish men and women as well as individuals. Through a decades-long exploration of Ireland as an



idealized memory, a hopeful but broken nation, and a global community heading toward reconciliation, MacLaverty subtly surveys and critiques Northern Ireland and its people through the characters' interaction with the land.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Bernard MacLaverty's *Lamb* and *Cal*: Shattering the Myth of the Land

Bernard MacLaverty's first two novels, *Lamb* (1980) and *Cal* (1983), explore the cultural and individual ramifications of the Northern Irish Troubles through the lives of two young men, Michael Lamb and Cal McCluskey. Resisting the urge to write immediately, MacLaverty wrote *Lamb* roughly ten years after the start of the contemporary Troubles, and these novels show that MacLaverty was still processing the atrocities occurring in his homeland. In a 1998 interview with Rosa Gonzales, MacLaverty talks about his experience growing up in a quiet Northern Ireland, only to find his country destroyed as he grew into adulthood (24). *Lamb* and *Cal* arise out of this experience of finding his homeland "shattered in that way" (Gonzales 24). These two novels, along with two early short story collections, constitute the "first installment of MacLaverty's career" (Russell *Bernard MacLaverty* 126) and so can be examined together because of their similar bleak outlook toward the Northern Irish Troubles. Discussions of *Lamb* are practically absent in journals and book-length consideration of MacLaverty's works. Richard Rankin Russell's forthcoming 2008 book *Bernard MacLaverty* is the only exception, featuring an entire chapter on the novel. Much of the current criticism on *Cal* focuses on the obvious political nature of the novel, suggesting the necessity of wider readings.

MacLaverty's exploration of the land in connection with the Northern Irish Troubles can be seen subtly in how the characters interact with and respond to the land in all its aspects: physical elements, countryside, and the abstract political conception of the land. Although she focuses on MacLaverty's third novel, *Grace Notes*, Kristin Morrison's assertion that "the sea serves as indispensable witness and catalyst" (113) to the changes within that novel's main character can be applied to MacLaverty's earlier works as well. MacLaverty uses the land in addition to the sea as a witness and catalyst in *Lamb* and returns to it in *Grace Notes*. He begins his exploration with Michael Lamb's pastoral connection to the land and the perverse loss of innocence as the reality of Northern Irish politics and cultural ideologies emerge through this symbolic story. The land serves as spectator to the atrocities committed by Michael Lamb; it is by the sea that Michael asks Owen to run away with him and where Michael finally kills him. In *Cal*, the land by itself serves as indispensable witness and catalyst to many things: murder, usurpation, love and eventually, punishment. *Cal* explores more deeply the critique of the pastoral ideal begun in *Lamb* by discussing the political implications of the land in regard to republican ideology as well as the redeeming qualities found in a genuine connection to the actual land.

*Lamb* begins MacLaverty's exploration of these subtle politics through Michael Lamb's familial background, which establishes his strong romantic connection to the land and the countryside. Michael's father is a Northern Irish farmer whose dedication to the land created a strong sense of pride in his son for his father as well as a love of farming and nature. Michael feels more comfortable with the people of the country, with their slow pace, and the sense of community felt in his home town. In the rural towns, Michael knows everyone's face and most names, which creates a sense of unity for him (L 20). Michael has never felt comfortable in the city (84) because of the noise, the lights, and the hustle and bustle of people in the streets, which are so different from his childhood memories. While in London with Owen, Michael is disturbed by the noise and flashing lights of the arcade, Owen's favorite place (59). Michael cannot successfully adapt to living in the city, both culturally and economically; he does not spend his money wisely, and is even taken advantage of by two swindlers on the street in a rigged game of cards (67-69).

Michael has romanticized his rural upbringing through his memories; when describing his home, for example, he states, "In the middle of the buildings and at the back door of the house was the yard, always in his memory glistening with muck" (85). The juxtaposition of such contrasting words as "glistening" and "muck" illustrates Michael's love of the land. Much of his love for the land,

though, is connected to his love for his father. The positive father-son relationship Michael shares with his father is rare in Irish literature:

To his great credit, MacLaverty departs from the fatherly models established by Irish revival writers and novelists from the North [...] in his lovely evocation of Michael Lamb's father, whose profound love for his wife and son anchors his family and provides them with deep emotional sustenance despite their modest living. (Russell 81)

However, as Russell emphasizes, Michael's father is not perfect, often times loving and caring for his wife to the detriment of the farm, which confirms the fact that the attention Michael's father gave his wife effectively venerated her above the Virgin Mary and the traditional "mistress" of Ireland, the land. Michael states that the farm began to fall into temporary disrepair, as his father spent more time caring for his disabled mother than taking care of the land (85). This veneration of an actual woman who needs care is an unexpected but needed change to the Irish (both North and South) theme of the land as a distressed woman who needs rescuing by the young men of her country.

Michael looks up to his father and sees him as the perfect model of fatherly affection. His father is loving, committed to his family, and seeks out opportunities to bond with his son. Many of these opportunities for bonding occur in natural settings, instilling in Michael a "respect for every living thing" (86). Michael remembers his father's ability to live in harmony with nature:

He pulled the chickens' necks so fast and expertly that they never felt a thing. He showed Michael the best black pools, with their slow wheels of foam, to find trout and taught him how to distinguish the various birds of prey. The sparrow-hawk, the kestrel, the harrier, and when they were on Tor Head, the eagle. [...] The fact that he lost several lambs a year to them did not diminish his admiration for them. (86)

Michael recalls another memory in which a gull became caught by his fishing hook. Although his father hated seagulls and smashed their eggs, he worked very hard to free the bird from his fishing line because he felt he could not "leave it in that state" (88). Michael obviously connects his father with the natural world, and, therefore, the love he has for his father influences his romantic attitude toward the land.

Although his father wanted him to stay, take over the farm, and work the land (89), Michael instead carries his father's respect for nature and the land to his work at the Home. He feels comfortable in the garden and in the carpentry room at the Home because those places remind him of his own experiences as a child. While in England, Michael reminisces about the natural aspects of the Home, the memories of which bring a sense of relief and calmness in the hustle and bustle of urban London:

Fresh garden peas. His mind relaxed into the past again. Brother Benedict had put him in charge of the kitchen garden at the Home and he had loved every minute of it. Preparing the ground with sweat, the feel of the hard dried peas as he dropped them into the trench, some of them shaped like green cubes, the spears of them bursting through into the air, the weeding and training upward on

dead twigs and finally the eating. Cracking open the hollow pods and letting six fat peas among the rows. (97-8)

The land is distinctly and undeniably linked to the past for Michael, and while he tries to forge a connection between the land and the future, it does not work.

Following this memory of the garden at the Home, Michael debates whether he could get a job in market gardening, although he finally realizes that none of it will work because he cannot get Owen into a school without lying, which he cannot do successfully. This truth is too depressing for Michael and he reverts to his memories again, this time remembering the brassicas he planted in the garden. Michael uses the memories to create a more palatable present and attempts to believe in a better future, although he ultimately fails.

In the film adaptation of *Lamb*, MacLaverty and directorial and production staff highlighted Michael's simple and natural attributes as best they could. Since MacLaverty wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation, these images garner strength not normally afforded to adaptations. Michael is not seen in many academic situations because he is not an educated man, nor does he understand how to navigate social situations. He is comfortable working with his hands and working the land that connects him to his father. The first image in the film the viewer sees of Michael is him teaching a shop class where the boys are constructing crucifixes. Dust fills the air and the sounds of hammers echo throughout the room. In two later, but separate, scenes, Michael is shown

teaching the boys how to grow and harvest the vegetables in the garden. Shoveling manure for fertilizer so the plants can grow, Michael notices that Owen is too small to wield the shovel he has given him correctly, so he takes the shovel from Owen and gives him a new job weeding. Owen shows little knowledge of the land, unable to distinguish between a weed and a leek. Michael instructs him on these matters, helping him find purpose and worth in his work.

Michael cannot see the efficacy of his actions at the Home like he does when he farms the land, resulting in a lack of real religious purpose for him at the Home, which prepares him to leave the Order and take Owen away. Throughout the novel, Michael struggles with the effects of his lost faith and purpose. In his attempt to work through his doubts of the reality of God, Michael finds no suitable figure to guide him. His beloved father has died, and his spiritual father figure, Brother Benedict, only increases Michael's doubts through his harsh judgments and actions towards the boys. Michael often confronts Brother Benedict about his behavior toward the boys, especially Owen Kane. When reprimanded by Brother Benedict for the amount of time he spent with Owen, Michael responds by critiquing the school and, by extension, Brother Benedict:

MICHAEL: But [Owen] needs a lot of time. Nobody has ever spent time on him before.



BROTHER BENEDICT: I admire your text-book idealism, Brother Sebastian, but I have rarely seen it work. [...] What we run here, Brother, is a finishing school for the sons of the Idle Poor.

MICHAEL: It finishes them all right. (14)

Michael does not feel the Home, a representative of God in his mind, understands the fatherly love that Christ extends to His children. Because of this lack of understanding, he loses what is left of his faith in God and places it in a mixture of God the Father and his own earthly father, which he then later transfers to himself, perversely, stating, "I am love" (112-113).

Michael's increasingly bizarre spiritual beliefs create the ideal situation in which to develop the misguided love by which MacLaverty was inspired to write the novel. MacLaverty confesses that *Lamb* is

an attempt to write about [the Troubles] obliquely, yet there is something, a bleak image or a bleak metaphor where a man who destroys the thing he loves sees that something misdirected his love, saying I love this child, or in the case of some people who say, "I love this country and I'm going to destroy it." (Gonzales 24)

MacLaverty is here speaking of the abstract national definition of the land.

Owen becomes symbolic of Northern Ireland as a state and Michael of the misguided citizens that destroy her while trying to save her, connecting the land of Northern Ireland to the destructive power of misguided love. Eventually, the only adult Owen trusts, Michael, will kill him. Although he tries to find Owen a peaceful and happy place for Owen by killing him in the middle of a seizure, which Owen describes as "a nice feeling. Everything is right. [...] it's the right

colour, the right smell. [...] It's beautiful" (100), Michael realizes that he cannot free Owen from the violence that has persisted throughout his life. In fact, he has committed the ultimate act of violence towards him, despite his good intentions.

Together, the portrayals of Brother Benedict and Michael begin to show the reader the complexity of the land's significance. To Michael, it actively represents the past, a warm sense of nostalgia that brings back his memories of childhood and his loving father. In addition, the reader begins to see that the land also supports Michael's identity as a Northern Irish citizen when he and Owen are in London. A currently lapsed Catholic, Michael has lost the religious dimension to his identity. Michael forgets to ask the old Irish woman in the second hotel where and when Mass is held. She reminds him, subtly testing his story and his commitment to the supposedly pure Catholic "Irish identity" —love of church, love of land (102-3). This conversation and Michael's rejection of Catholicism best illustrates the truth that the land is the only signifier of his identity now, with the exception of his Irish accent, which he cannot hide. However, Michael feels he cannot truly express his identity through his identification with the land. After a few mistakes of telling fellow travelers his true name, Michael realizes to protect the boy and himself, he must change his name and his hometown. But eventually his lack of specific knowledge about the areas of Ireland, especially Dublin, cast suspicion on his person, causing

Michael believe that he will have to take the boy to Northern Ireland, where he knows the names of places and the landscapes.

Contrary to Michael's representation of the land, "true" Irish identity and strength is represented in the land to Brother Benedict. Upon returning from his father's funeral, Benedict asks Michael if there was any trouble in the Six Counties while he was there. When Michael replies that he was not thinking about the violence, Benedict gently chides him that he should always be thinking of it and valorizes the provisional IRA, stating "they are angry men with vision, Brother, and by God their anger is justified. Ireland has not much longer to suffer. Her misery will soon be over and we'll be a united country again" (9). Michael is not a closet IRA supporter like Brother Benedict, who desires a united Irish nation through the use of violence. Benedict also represents the kind of man that MacLaverty is speaking of—one that loves his country, but will destroy her through love. Michael has different feelings towards the IRA and their tactics to free Ireland. He responds simply and without guile to Brother Benedict's statement: "Yes [...] but I don't like their methods" (9). Brother Benedict then challenges Michael's identity as a Northern Irish Catholic by stating, "You're an Ulsterman. You should know the truth of the situation [of the Troubles]" (9). Michael's identity has now been challenged with respect to all three definitions of the land, potentially causing a severe self-crisis. The hopelessness of the novel

stems from the fact that Michael eventually uses violence to “free” Owen from the life that awaits him. Michael cannot see another way to protect him from the pain of life. He would rather kill the boy than see him go back to Brother Benedict and the Home.

Michael’s transformation from a man like his father to a man like, or worse than, Brother Benedict can be seen through the early bleak images of the land, which represents the futility of Michael’s actions and beliefs (and possibly those of nationalistic Northern Irish citizens). The earliest images of the land appear when Michael is required to take daily walks with Brother Benedict as a punishment for his questioning of the Home and the Church. They walk along the beach, talking of Michael’s lack of spiritual discipline and faith. The beach is described as flat, hard and open, the tide having “withdrawn almost completely” (25). The water, the life-giving attribute of the landscape, has left, leaving nothing but dry, grainy sand. Stones, debris and jellyfish litter the shoreline.

This image of beach-side waste is greatly contrasted with other, much more positive MacLaverty images of beaches and water. For example, in his short story “At The Beach” from *Walking the Dog*, the main character, Maureen, has a spiritual moment while she and her husband vacation at a beach resort in Spain. As she explores the town, she discovers a small church on the outskirts. She enters the courtyard and finds a well, by which she discovers the essence of

her soul: “Her soul was herself—it was the way she treated other people, it was the love she had for her children, for the people around her and for the people she had never seen but felt responsible for. Her soul was the way she treated people [...]” (*Walking the Dog* 93). While Maureen and her husband are at a seaside resort, a more urban setting than the Home, the peace the Maureen finds in the church by the beach is not even marginally present in the beach by the Home. This beach is all desolation and solitariness. Michael finds no connection to the beach, to himself, or to other people.

In a similar manner, when Michael takes Owen to Northern Ireland, he notices on the drive to the beach the destruction that the Troubles have wrecked upon the smaller towns in the country: burnt out buildings, metal security fences, boarded up windows (137). But he notices the strongest effects in Strabane, which was one of the worst hit towns in Northern Ireland by the Troubles:

But in Strabane the evidence was everywhere. Tall terraces of shops with charred rafters for roofs, crumbling gables, slogans sprayed everywhere, men with nothing to do standing sheltering from the rain in doorways. [...] A town bent on self-destruction. Cutting off its nose to spite the British Government’s face. (139)

Strabane, a heavily nationalist town, is a physical reminder of misguided love and possibly represents an unconscious plea toward Michael to rethink his plan to drown the boy. These townspeople will allow the destruction of their own town so that the British do not “win,” foreshadowing Michael’s own actions to

kill the boy so that Brother Benedict does not “win” by continuing to physically and emotionally abuse Owen at the Home. The devastation of the land suggests the republicans’ destruction of the possibility of compromise and reconciliation with Northern Irish Unionists. When each side in the struggle is insularly resolute in their determination to be right and to be champion, no one emerges victorious, not the Catholics, not the Protestants, not Michael, not Owen.

Although the beach Michael and Owen visit in County Donegal, back in the Republic, has no visual effects of the Troubles, it is desolate, just like the beach at the beginning of the novel and reflects MacLaverty’s bleak outlook toward Northern Ireland at this time. No one is around, nor is there any type of civilization near it. The two can stand on the top of the dunes and see the “vast empty stretch of sand, stretching for about two miles, white flat sand fading into rock at the far end” (147). Owen finds the beach inhospitable: “The grass was sharp and spiky and Owen kept cursing as it penetrated the cloth of his jeans” (146), but the boy makes the best of it, running up the dunes and falling down them. Even Michael finds the beach hostile, a signal that he has lost his connection with the land: “As Michael lay back on the dry soft sand the sun came out harshly bright but not warm” (146). The memory of his father and his hatred of seagulls is evoked by the description of the beach: “Except for themselves and a few gulls the beach was completely deserted” (147). The land is empty,

containing nothing, but the imagery of the seagulls evokes the words of Michael's father. Although he respects every living thing, he hates seagulls and would take Michael out every season to smash the gull eggs. According to his father, seagulls are "a curse [...] They do more damage than enough. They'll peck the eyes out a lamb before the ewe can get her born—aye, and the tongue too" (86).

Michael and Owen take a walk on the beach reminiscent of the walk Michael takes with Brother Benedict at the beginning of the novel. Michael has now become what he hated most. The simple and natural man found in the beginning of the novel has become monstrous. Russell makes this connection to Benedict, even arguing "although Lamb tells himself that he loves the boy and finally kills him out of misguided love, his self-worship results in something far worse than Owen would have had to endure in Benedict's school or at home with his mother" (84). Michael helps create the conditions for Owen to have a seizure by substituting his medication with aspirin so that he can drown him in the ocean. MacLaverty believes this perversion of the traditional baptism service robs the land of any purity it did have (Campbell 5).

The final scene on the beach reflects this change and symbolizes the negativity of the Northern Irish Troubles. The image of Owen's body, combined with the emptiness of the beach, weighs heavily upon the reader and upon

Michael. The swooping seagulls of the beach are an ominous reminder that Michael has lost any connection with his father, who loved nature and Michael. Not only is Michael reminded of his disconnection to his father, but through that disconnection, he has lost his relationship to the land as well. Michael feels like the squatter building he and Owen stayed at in London: “He felt gutted. It was as if his insides and his soul had been burned out. There was nothing left of him [...]” (152). This image also recalls images of gutted buildings from the Northern Irish Troubles. This connection to the city removes any vestiges of the natural and the place that Michael feels at home; he has destroyed the comfort of the land for him, and thus any hope for the future.

If *Lamb* offers no hope for a positive resolution to the contemporary Troubles, *Cal*, critically applauded as MacLaverty’s most direct critique of the Troubles, begins the slow process of rebuilding an image of Northern Ireland that can move forward in both culture and politics. The land lies at the very heart of the Troubles in Ireland: the battle over land, and thus power, goes back to the eleventh century. Since that time, the Irish, both North and South, have endured the presence of the British in their own country as a colonizing force attempting to subdue and assimilate the country for centuries. The land, then, should have a fitting role in recovering what has been lost, Northern Irish peace and identity.



Some Irish felt that the most effective method of expelling the British from Ireland was violence, and MacLaverty explores this method in the novel. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many farms were owned by absentee landlords living in England who would rent the land to Irish tenants under terrible terms in order to benefit their own interests. Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* provides an apt example of the frustration the Irish felt with the British control over Ireland during this time. The Morton family, assumedly British and who own and operate a farm on the outskirts of Derry, is seen by those friendly to the IRA as usurpers, people who have taken the land from its rightful owners. While reality may have changed, and the Mortons appear to be a legitimate landowning family, the image of self-serving Protestant British landlords was a powerful image and therefore remained a convenient propaganda illustration for radical protest groups. During a discussion about Bloody Sunday, Skeffington, the IRA organizer behind the Morton murder, states, "And we were all Irishmen living in our own country. *They* were the trespassers" (*Cal* 67). Skeffington and the IRA seek to remove people like the Mortons from Northern Ireland by any means possible. Although a Royal Ulster Constabulary reserve officer, Robert Morton was not special; he was a random choice for a victim. The goal was to kill a Protestant. Skeffington believes that the violence will force the British to leave. He tells Cal, "Not to act—you know—is to act. [. . .] By not doing anything

you are helping to keep the Brits here” (65). Cal believes there has to be another way and desires peace after experiencing the guilt of violence, stemming from his driving of the getaway car when Crilly murders Morton.

However, MacLaverty complicates the traditional dichotomy of Catholicism versus Protestantism in Cal’s usurpation of the cottage on the Morton farm and in his relationship with the Catholic Marcella. After being burned out of his house in a primarily Protestant neighborhood, Cal leaves his father with his brother and secretly moves into an abandoned cottage on the Morton farm. While the reader might sympathize more with Cal—he has been beaten by a group of Protestant youths and burned out of his house by the Protestants in his neighborhood—he is by definition a usurper. He has illegally appropriated the cottage as his own and he knows it, although he uses another term: “I’m squatting,” he states his first night in the cottage (82). Russell references this action in his chapter on *Cal*, detailing how Cal’s action recalls Derry Catholics, squatting as a form of protest during the late 1960s (131). As MacLaverty complicates Cal’s attitude towards the land and those that inhabit it, he creates a greater depth to his novels because the struggle is no longer black and white and takes a small step towards reconciliation, or at least peace, between these two opposing groups.

Similar to the way MacLaverty complicates the religious dichotomy in Northern Ireland, he complicates the traditional rhetoric of Ireland as a woman, both as maiden and mother, which helps perpetuate the violence of the republican side of the Troubles by drawing on but ultimately critiquing it. The allegory of Mother Ireland was popular during the twentieth century, with characters such as Mangan's Dark Rosaleen and the Aisling figure prevalent in many nationalistic tales (Storey 36). The general plot for these Mother Ireland tales was simple but powerful:

The protagonist is a young rebel on the run, and in each case he meets or seeks union with a beautiful young woman somehow linked to the nationalist movement. [. . .] The allegorical meaning is clear: consummation and permanent union with the woman, the symbol of Ireland, will be achieved only when the Irish nation is established. (Storey 36)

Many radical nationalists and certainly republicans do not believe this awaited union of the Irish nation was achieved by the creation of the Republic of Ireland because Northern Ireland was not included.

The other image of Ireland as woman is that of the Mother Ireland allegory, found in stories such as the Shan van Vocht legend. The variations of the allegory focus on the maternal relationship of Ireland with the men of the nation (Innes 27). Kersti Tarien Powell elucidates this allegory, stating motherhood is a complicated but common theme in Irish literature: "In Irish fiction, the image of mother and the theme of motherhood are complicated by

Ireland's symbolic identity as 'Mother Ireland'" (140). Although the feminization of Ireland as both maiden and mother was a "convenient symbolic image for Ireland's colonizers [because] the country was seen as an object to be possessed" (Powell 140), the Irish reclaimed the images and made them a rallying cry for their fight against the British. For example, in William Butler Yeats's 1902 one-act play, *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, the embodiment of the Irish nation, appears as an unattractive old woman and encourages young men to sacrifice themselves for her by removing those who have taken residence in her house and stolen her property, promising immortality and glory to those who engage in battle. The call to fight is mesmerizing for the protagonist, Michael, and he answers her summons, causing her to transform into a beautiful, queen-like woman. She becomes a mother-figure to young Irish men, calling her own to defend and liberate her from her enemies.

MacLaverty's Cal is a man without a mother and may be unconsciously trying to fill that void with different mother figures. Cal idolizes his devout Catholic mother, who went to Mass daily and led the family rosary after every dinner, and, at one point, remembers her well-worn Bible (33). He speculates whether his nostalgic memories of his mother are a result of her early death and wonders if she had lived into his adolescence would his memories be different (33). Nevertheless, Cal has transmitted his idealization of his mother to Ireland.

As he drives over the border to a soccer match in Clones, “he experienced the feeling of freedom he always got. This was Ireland—the real Ireland. He felt he had come out from under the weight and darkness of Protestant Ulster, with its neat stifled Sabbath towns” (39). Cal’s fixation with the ‘real’ Ireland seeps into his daily conversation. He comments to Marcella during an afternoon walk through the countryside, “It’s [the land] too much like a growing factory. It’s all so much money. I like the look of Donegal where nothing grows. Beaches, bogs and mountains” (117). Cal shows his desire for Northern Ireland to, in a way, revert to the way it was before the modernizing effects of the British colonization and wars occurred. A pure, clean country is his naïve concept of an idealized Northern Ireland. Many Irish young men, like Skeffington, Crilly and even Cal, seem to have forgotten the warring and fighting between tribal chiefs that plagued Ireland before the British came. It was not a peaceful nation at that time either. The Irish have always fought over the land; the difference is whether the battles were internally or externally motivated.

Both Skeffington and Crilly exemplify a generation of young men who adhere to the Mother Ireland myth. The nation cannot be separated from the land for them. Skeffington alludes to Padraic H. Pearse’s poem “The Mother” when Cal accuses him of having no feelings about the violent methods of the IRA. Pearse, executed for his involvement in the 1916 Easter Uprising, represents a

concrete example of the fulfillment of this myth. It is such a part of Skeffington's identity that he begins to recite it to Cal from memory:

'I do not grudge them: Lord, I do not grudge  
My two strong sons that I have seen go out  
To break their strength and die, they and a few,  
In bloody protest for a glorious thing ...  
The poem ends, Cahal,  
'And yet I have my joy:  
My sons were faithful and they fought.'  
Unlike you, Cahal. (66)

Skeffington admonishes Cal for not doing his part by evoking the Mother Ireland myth, typified by Pearse's poem, and tries to guilt Cal into remaining active in the IRA. Interestingly, Skeffington ignores the sadness in the poem, choosing to focus on the mother's pride in her sons for fighting. And yet Cal is deeply connected to the sadness and despair the actions of the poem can bring, making the poem more personal for him than to Skeffington, who comments "Think of the issues, not the people. Think of an Ireland free of the Brits" (24). Cal and his father, Shamie, however, have experienced the backlash from rhetoric like Skeffington's. They have been threatened and burned out of their house, and Cal has been physically assaulted by neighboring Protestants. Cal feels the immense guilt of participating in the murder of Marcella's husband. He cannot only "think of the issues" because he has been and has seen the victim of that kind of violence.

Cal thinks upon the repercussions of radical nationalistic ideology in Ireland as his own physical conditions worsen. Upon his first night in the Morton cottage after his home has been burned down, he reflects on his suffering, likening himself to “a monk in his cell not only deprived of light and comfort but, in the mood he was in, deprived of God” (83). However, Cal has not lost his faith in God completely and wonders,

What if he had suffered for another person? To suffer for something which didn't exist, that was like Ireland. People were dying every day, men and women were being crippled and turned into vegetables in the name of Ireland. An Ireland which never was and never would be. (83)

Stephen Watt states that at this point Cal realizes that “the causes of the murder of Robert Morton and the maiming of Morton's elderly father [...] reside in ideology and the representations that further it—in mythologies, not in *facts*, historical or material” (136). The mythical image of sons fighting for a besieged mother causes the violence. Cal's musings sound familiar for MacLaverty's readers; Michael Lamb has a similarly hopeless attitude toward the efficacy of the violence in Ireland in achieving the goal of a free Ireland.

Cal revisits this feeling of fighting for an unattainable goal when he reflects on his relationship with Marcella. In fact, he uses almost the same terms: “He was in love with the one woman in the world who was forbidden him. He was suffering for something which could not exist” (92). Cal and Marcella will

never have a normal, open relationship because of Cal's participation in her husband's murder, even though she was not deeply in love with Morton. His betrayal and violence will keep the two apart. Cal has taken Marcella's husband from her, but, more important, he has taken her daughter's father away. Lucy will grow up without her father because of Cal and Crilly. Cal and his actions are a more obvious example of MacLaverty's belief that some radical Irish are destroying their country in the name of love. Cal has destroyed any chance of having a mature, loving relationship with Marcella because of his role in the destruction of her family, even though he was not the one to pull the trigger.

Because his actions were based on a sense of fear for his own safety, Cal feels a deep sense of regret and guilt, and throughout the novel he searches for a way to do penance for his actions, finally working the Morton farmland. Jeanette Shumaker examines the way in which Cal attempts to relieve himself of his guilt, arguing that MacLaverty blurs "the traditional confession of crime with the modern confession of sexual desire" in *Cal* (9). However, she focuses more on how Cal chooses to confess than how he deals with his guilt through penance. Shumaker briefly states that "Cal welcomes the exhausting physical labor traditionally done by Catholics because it is also a kind of penance that helps him sleep" (11), but does not carry this idea any further. Little criticism, excluding



Russell's chapter on *Cal*, has examined how Cal uses the physical labor of working the Morton's farm as a form of penance.

Working the land has been a traditional form of punishment from biblical times. When God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, He told Adam that his punishment would be to work the land. Day after day, Adam would have to work the land with his own hands to survive, but the land would not be hospitable (Genesis 3:17-19). Cal's physical labor connects him to this religious tradition of physical suffering, especially through the specifically Catholic story of Matt Talbot's mortification Cal hears during Mass one morning. Talbot, after years of drunkenness, spent the rest of his years in atonement, which he found by wearing chains wrapped around his waist. The priest tells that congregation that "he had been wearing them for so long and had them so tightly tied about him that it was almost impossible to remove them from the mortified flesh of his body" (36). This act of penance weighs heavily upon Cal throughout the novel, causing him to ponder his level of commitment to his image of God and to the penance for his sins. Cal longs to have the same level of dedication to his penance and yet cannot quite find it in himself until the very last lines of the novel: "The next morning, Christmas Eve, almost as if he expected it, the police arrived to arrest him and he stood in a dead man's Y-

fronts listening to the charge, grateful that someone was going to beat him to within an inch of his life" (154).

Whether or not Cal consciously knows his work on the farm is a form of penance is debatable; however, he does seek out the Morton farm. His actions toward the farm are reminiscent of his actions towards Marcella; he wishes for her to absolve him from his guilt (Shumaker 10). Cal's first exposure to the farm comes when his father asks him to sell some wood that Cal has cut. Deciding to take the wood to the farm in order to see Marcella, he instead meets Mrs. Morton. She agrees to buy some of the logs and tells Cal she will pay him extra to have them chopped into smaller pieces and stacked by the house because they are short-handed at the farm. Cal and the reader understand that the Mortons are short-handed because they have lost two major farm workers within the last year— Robert and Mr. Morton, who Crilly shot that night but only severely wounded. Shumaker suggests that Cal is attempting to replace Robert in his relationship with Marcella (9). While Cal does fill some of Marcella's needs that are being not met after the death of her husband, he also takes up some of the slack around the farm that Morton's death has created.

Cal desires physical mortification to cleanse him of his guilt and bring a sense of peace; the land provides him a venue to accomplish this goal. As he chops the wood, for example, his hands become "so sore now that he used only

used his fingers to make the stack of wood. It was as if his palms had been scalded. He could not bear to touch the axe again" (45). Cal returns the next day and, after a hard day's labor, procures a job to work on the Morton farm picking potatoes. Cal finds the same sense of peace picking potatoes that he finds sitting in the church during Mass: "Cal found that his mind was going blank for long periods with the repetitiveness of the work, and when he became aware of this he enjoyed it in retrospect. It was not often these days that he could remain switched off for any length of time" (56). He also recognizes that "although he ended up each day physically filthy, work had a cleansing effect on him" (56). He is receiving the benefits of penance even if he does not realize that is what he is accomplishing working on the farm. The work on the farm also cures Cal of his insomnia. By bedtime, he is so tired that he falls right asleep and sleeps through the night.

Cal's full-time position at the farm at first seems to offer him the opportunity to do his penance for his participation in the Morton murder, but, in the end, it does not suffice. However, his work on the Morton farm does help him in his quest for punishment. When Mrs. Morton asks him if he would like to work on the farm full time, he responds immediately in the affirmative: "Cal knew it was what he had been *waiting* for [...]" (56, my italics). He has been waiting to find a way to make amends with the Morton's, especially Marcella.

Although he does not consciously think about it, he believes that the farm holds a way for him to find peace. This phrase resonates with the essence of the concluding phrase of novel: “he stood in a dead man’s Y-fronts listening to the charge, grateful that *at last* someone was someone was going to beat him to within an inch of his life” (154, my italics). The beating and eventual incarceration completes the penance Cal was looking and waiting for when he took the job at the farm. Through his hard, manual labor job, Cal has developed the courage and fortitude to endure the torture and pain that his punishment will entail. The anticipation he felt upon coming to work the farm is satisfied as he is taken from the farm by the police.

The impending beating at the end of the novel signifies growth in Cal from a child to a man, which occurs as he moves out of his town and into the countryside. When Cal is living in the town with his father, he often fulfills the role of the woman in the house; he stays at home all day, causing Cal’s father to feel that Cal needs to cook and clean around the house because he has no job (14-15; 17; 57). He also has a weak constitution, directly related to the guilt he feels over Morton’s murder, and has to quit his job at the abattoir because he cannot stomach the slaughter of the animals: “The smell made me want to throw up all the time,” he tells his father (31). His father is ashamed of his weakness because it makes Cal appear unmanly. In addition to his actions, Cal’s appearance also

suggests womanly attributes, although none of them is intentional. Cal's long hair was common for young Irish men during this time, but it does give the reader an image of a young woman as well. His fingernails are long, like a woman's, so that he can play the guitar. However, once Cal starts to work on the farm, he takes on more of the characteristics normally attributed to a man. The land plays a role in this transformation. Although he admits that he knows nothing of farm work, Cal begins to learn it and finds "the reek of living cattle much more acceptable than the smell of the abattoir and after a while [grows] to like it. The animals had a soft milky smell on their breath and the dung smell that hung around him was not unpleasant" (68).

Cal's outward changes manifested themselves as inward change as well. For example, as Cal's outward appearance becomes dirtier and dirtier, in both his clothing and his body, his conscience becomes slightly cleaner, or at least it doesn't bother him as much. The tension in his stomach is less noticeable when he spends time in the countryside with Marcella and as he works the land. Cal's ability to accept and even welcome the beating at the end of the novel shows that Cal has grown up and can face his punishment like a man, not cowering like a child. Previously he had desired the beating, but had been unable to turn himself in, to intentionally cause himself pain.

According to Russell, *Cal* “brings to a close the first installment of MacLaverty’s career” (126). *Lamb* and *Cal* present the first stage of MacLaverty’s exploration of the land and its social, cultural, and political implications. Although the outlook in *Lamb* begins bleak, *Cal* is slightly brighter. Cal’s work on the Morton farm leads him to the place where he can find hope, although it does not show the life resulting from that hope. MacLaverty’s later work, *Grace Notes*, would open new spaces for hope in Northern Ireland through Catherine McKenna’s connections to the land and people of other nations across the globe.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Move from the Island: Finding Fulfillment in International Lands in Bernard MacLaverty’s *Grace Notes*

Fourteen years passed between the publication of MacLaverty’s highly acclaimed *Cal* (1983) and his next novel, *Grace Notes* (1997), which won The Saltire Scottish Book of the Year Award in 1997 and was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize. During this interval, MacLaverty wrote two collections of short stories, *The Great Profundo* (1987) and *Walking the Dog* (1994). These collections focus on the themes of humanity in community, and love and loneliness, respectively. Although these collections were well received, many

wondered at the gap between the novels *Cal* and *Grace Notes*. MacLavery addressed this issue in an interview “In Which the Author Interviews Himself” after the publication of *Grace Notes* and posted his response on his official website:

[W]hy should punctuality in fiction writing be of any importance? Maybe I could have written a bad novel two or three years after the last one—as a matter of fact I did but I'm glad I didn't publish it. Would publishing it have improved the situation? [. . .] There is a terrible WASP thing about work - you must produce a book every two years. I left teaching to get AWAY from such routines. In teaching bells went off every forty minutes. In writing must they go off every two years? (MacLavery “Biography”)

*The Anatomy School* (2001) was published only four years after *Grace Notes*, a similar time interval between *Lamb* and *Cal*.

*Grace Notes* marks a great change from his earlier novels in the way MacLavery represents the land and his characters’ relationship to the land as physical reality, countryside, and nation, and this representation reflects the growing trend towards peace in Northern Ireland during that time. His characters become more accepting and individually responsible, not allowing others to define who they are or decide what they do, unlike Cal McCluskey. They discover the folly of blindly following the crowd and the freedom of becoming their own person. If, as Oona Frawley argues, the land is the representative of the past through the sense of nostalgia linked to it, then a break

with the land of Ireland should signify growth in the fictive character and the country, a sense of hope for the future not grounded in violence and death.

Although the greatest intensity of the Northern Irish Troubles occurred from 1970-1972 and again from 1980-1982, the years between *Cal* and *Grace Notes* (1983-1997), began to show a slight increase in the ability and desire to find an acceptable solution to the contemporary Troubles despite intermittent eruptions of violence. Political protests, for the most part, remained nonviolent. According to Thomas Hennessy, these attempts were slow to show progress and the terms of cultural identity did not change much. However, many daily aspects of citizens' lives improved slightly. Equality in employment was a goal that the British and Northern Irish governments began to work towards, and slowly the gap between the high percentage of Protestant and relatively lower percentage of Catholics employed was closed (239-40). Reforms in schools fared better: quicker strides were made in education than in fair employment. While the majority of students still attended religion-specific schools, by 1993 Northern Ireland saw the creation of twenty-one integrated schools, and about one percent of the school population was attending these schools that year (245). Reconciliation groups on the national, county, and community level arose during the decade between 1984 and 1994, slowly helping Northern Ireland to move towards a peace agreement. This work began with peace talks in 1988 and



culminated with the IRA ceasefire in 1994 and the combined Loyalist ceasefire in 1996, although both eventually broke down.

Although MacLaverty was writing *Grace Notes* during the ceasefires, it would be erroneous to speculate that these events were his sole influence. In fact, his treatment of the land was beginning to change, as seen toward the end of *Cal*. *Grace Notes* expands the theme, begun in *Cal*, of the insufficiency of the land to renew the lives of Northern Irish men and women involved in the current Troubles, and the insufficiency of the land to complete their identity. In an interview with Marisol Morales Ladron, MacLaverty states, “We’ve got to change, we’ve got to do things differently, we can’t go on killing each other” (206), regarding the stalemate between Catholics and Protestants. This change in relationship to the land partially reflects MacLaverty’s need to do something different because it causes readers to see the Troubles differently. In *Grace Notes*, MacLaverty chooses to situate Catherine on the island of Islay for one half of the novel and claims a peace and identity from other nations for his own Irish characters. Catherine McKenna must leave Northern Ireland in order to see the country and herself. She is still connected to the land, as evidenced by a seminal beach scene, but searches for a new, transnational identity independent of Northern Ireland alone. She has never felt a strong connection to her own

homeland, but rather to the homelands of her treasured music composers who influenced her most, especially eastern Europeans.

However, just because MacLavery moves away from Ireland, both literally and figuratively, does not imply that the three definitions of the land outlined in the introduction should be considered inapplicable, but they are less controlling in this novel. The terms here become more abstract, as the force of their definitions become more spiritual. This move away from concrete conceptions of the land illustrates MacLavery's belief that a person cannot act his way out the Troubles through the nationalistic methods seen in *Lamb* and *Cal* and will need a new vision to cope and even thrive. That new belief, though, is only attained by achieving a distance from the Ireland of the late nineteenth-century and the early twentieth-century, the time of the nationalistic fervor of Yeats and Lady Gregory.

This distance, for MacLavery, stems from his own decades-long exile to Scotland. MacLavery, intentionally or unintentionally, seems influenced by the tradition of exile in Irish literature in his next episode of work and life; he left Northern Ireland in 1975, relocating his family first to Edinburgh and then to the Isle of Islay, finally settling his family in Glasgow. He is glad that he left Northern Ireland when he did, stating, "I settled in Scotland, looked back at Ireland and felt it was good that I wasn't there witnessing the fear, the hate and

the threats” (Ladron 210). Many Irish writers, like Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett, left the country in search of a greater sense of freedom. Perhaps because of their shared exile status, MacLaverty references Beckett in his 1994 short story collection *Walking the Dog*. His most recent novel, *The Anatomy School*, has been likened to Joyce’s *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, illustrating a distinct influence on his later work by exiled Irish writers, especially Joyce, who spent much of his lifetime outside of Ireland. Although MacLaverty speaks fondly of his childhood in Northern Ireland, Joyce spoke openly about his desire to flee from the oppressive culture of Ireland. Home, both in physical and national sense, was not worth staying in Ireland. He describes his many reasons in passionate language in a letter written to his companion Nora:

How could I like the idea of home? My home was simply a middle-class affair ruined by spendthrift habits which I have inherited. My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father’s ill-treatment, by years of trouble, and by my cynical frankness of conduct. [. . .] My brothers and sisters are nothing to me. One brother alone is capable of understanding me. [. . .] Six years ago I left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently. [. . .] Now I make war upon it by what I write and say and do. I cannot enter the social order except as a vagabond. (Eder 87)

Yet Joyce writes of Dublin his entire life. Joyce’s troubled childhood and young adult years indelibly affected his choices concerning the material of his work as well as the choices he made as an artist. The influence of James Joyce on Irish literature is undeniable: “Joyce has become a patron saint of artistic liberation

and creative renewal" (Vance 209). His eventual distance from Ireland and from Dublin allowed him to create realistic pictures of modern Irish life and people, just as MacLaverty's distance allowed him to create such life-like portraits of Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is no surprise that his protagonist from *Grace Notes*, Catherine McKenna, follows in these exiles' footsteps.

Catherine has no qualms about leaving Ireland after she has finished her schooling. Upon graduation from Queen's University in Belfast, she receives the Moncrieff-Hewitt award that is meant to encourage the recipient to "encounter the music of other countries" (*Grace Notes* 61). Catherine travels to Kiev and waits to meet renowned composer Anatoli Ivanovich Melnichuck, whose work is a mixture of "Asian and Western influences" (62). Already the reader begins to understand that Catherine is more than a Northern Irish composer from Belfast, but a woman of international knowledge and taste. In fact, while at a reception for the travel award she received, she meets composer Helmut Lemberg, who states that Catherine has "a sound universe of [her] own" (63). Catherine is capable of experiencing a larger Ireland than the romantic, but criticized, Ireland of *Lamb* and enjoys her self-imposed exile. While Michael Lamb's brief foray into London could be seen as an exile of sorts, returning to Ireland, whether north or south, is always an option, one that he eventually takes to the detriment of young Owen. Although her father did tell her not come home again, Catherine's exile,

like Joyce's, has been largely self-imposed and return is not seen as a possibility (90).

Catherine's international musical tastes develop as she moves away from the countryside of Ireland. Catherine began her study of music in Northern Ireland, but she could not stay in County Derry if she was to thrive. Her music lessons with Miss Bingham, a Protestant woman in the town, reveal Catherine's musical talent, and Miss Bingham introduces her to classical music, taking her to operas and symphonies in Belfast (102). Her time at Queen's University refines her ear and challenges her to expand her vision of music. However, according to Edna Longley, self-expression and art have consistently had difficulty flourishing in Belfast since the 1850s ("The Writer and Belfast" 66); Catherine, therefore, must leave. Even though Catherine knows her choice to remain in exile will strain her relationship with her parents, she chooses to live on the Isle of Islay and teach music there at a small school on the island, not returning to her native land for five years. Catherine is more creative, despite her depression, and experiences a positive reception of her music once she gets off the Irish island. Her first real success comes while teaching at the Islay school; the piece she composed for her students, "A Suite for Trumpetists and Tromboners," is performed and broadcast on the BBC. The students were inspired by the story of "Vivaldi in eighteenth-century Venice, a priest who never bothered to say

mass—music was enough for him” (100). Even in her lessons, Catherine draws from international composers as examples instead of traditional Irish or British musicians.

Catherine’s exile from the Irish nation combined with the international influence of her musical mentors changes the way in which Catherine sees herself as an individual, both in action and in name. As she leaves the land of Ireland, she no longer relies on traditional Irish views of Irish women to define herself; she does not believe that she is resigned to her mother’s life, living above a bar with an abusive, alcoholic husband. Although it takes her some time, she leaves drunken Dave, her daughter Anna’s father, and moves to Glasgow. Catherine can use birth control and have sex and even live with a Protestant man outside of the confines of marriage because she no longer lives in Ireland. Neither does Catherine believe that she is Irish in name; she does not define herself by the land she comes from. When Catherine first meets Dave, he tries to identify her as Irish by asking if she is from Ireland; Catherine chooses to identify herself by her current residence, Glasgow, where she lived briefly before moving to Islay. Unlike Michael Lamb, she does not choose to identify herself as Irish. Catherine may be physically and culturally from Ireland, but her soul is not. It is from all of the places whose music influenced her, such as Eastern Europe and Asia. Music transcends nationality for Catherine. Gerry Smyth correctly argues

that “MacLavery bypasses the notion of the Irish as an inherently musical race, however, by refusing to ally music with any particular tradition of national identity. Rather, music becomes the medium through which identity and otherness may commune” (16-7). MacLavery allows music to be pure, devoid of any Northern Irish cultural identity, and, therefore, Catherine can find her identity through music.

Not only does Catherine not identify herself as Irish in action or spirit or name, but also the land of Ireland does not hold the same beauty for her as other places. In Part I of *Grace Notes*, the countryside is only mentioned three times, and these descriptions are not particularly appealing. The first brief glimpse deceives readers into believing that MacLavery’s view of the land will continue to be romantic: “When they dropped down through the cloud at Aldergrove she saw how green the land was. And how small the fields. A mosaic of vivid greens and yellows and browns. Home. She wanted to cry again” (6). But the next description is quite different. As Catherine and her mother visit the cemetery the day after her late husband’s burial, her mother prays at his grave, and Catherine walks through the headstones, where she finds the grave of an old schoolmate, apparently killed during the Troubles (83-4). After Mrs. McKenna is finished praying, she and Catherine walk through the forest, a nostalgic place for both women. Mrs. McKenna remembers the airfield that occupied the space

during World War II, and Catherine remembers walking through the field with her father (85). The cemetery and adjacent forest only provide memories of death and war, both international and national, personal and impersonal. The land reflects this unfortunate reality. Although the path into the forest begins with a wide, flat area of grass, the path quickly becomes “overgrown with brambles and elder” (86). Catherine is reminded of the eastern European composer Janacek’s piece *On the Overgrown Path*, which she describes as “bleak beyond words” (86). This image of nature is not welcoming or inviting; the land has been neglected and seems to revolt against the intrusion of people through the overgrowth.

Despite the physical closeness the women share as they walk arm in arm into the forest, helping each other up a soft hill they must use to bypass a waterlogged place in the path, the conversation between the two women is just as bleak as Janacek’s music. Mrs. McKenna and Catherine try to have a normal mother-daughter conversation, but cannot move to reconcile with each other. Mrs. McKenna is appalled by Catherine’s lifestyle and music, and Catherine is fed up with her mother’s inability to see life from another’s viewpoint (88-90). MacLaverty symbolically challenges the underpinnings of the Irish family in this tense interchange between mother and daughter, and so challenges the influence of the past over Catherine. Edna Longley suggests that the family is one of the



main ways Northern Irish writers view the past, noting “it’s through parents that the individual locates himself or herself in history, and Irish history remains in many aspects a family affair” ( *The Living Stream* 152). Catherine modifies this belief as she finds herself and her identity in her musical family, separate from her biological family.

The last glimpse of the land in Part I occurs during Catherine’s drive to the airport for her flight to Glasgow and reveals her disconnection with the land in Ireland. The description is unemotional and straightforward: “The countryside became flat around Lough Neagh. Road signs warned of low-flying planes” (117). Catherine shows no emotional attachment to the land of her childhood as she prepares to leave it again. However, she responds emotionally to her window view of Glasgow as the plane descends toward the airport runway. The city is beautiful, probably an extension of her intense desire to see her daughter Anna after their first separation since birth: “The plane tilted and she looked out of the window. The sight took her breath away. It was a clear night and the city lights glittered on the ground breath her. Yellow sodium lights in chains and necklaces, loops and patterns—the whole city was like a flattened chandelier” (130). Glasgow holds life and self-expression for Catherine, and she imparts that vitality to the physical surroundings. She has moved from the Northern Irish countryside to the Scottish city, and the move from Ireland is

good for Catherine. It allows her to see clearly and to speak through her music clearly as well. MacLaverty expresses his own belief in the good of moving:

“Being in another country gives me a sense of perspective. There are more important issues in the world than the orange and the green” (Ladron 210).

Catherine has found those things more important than sectarianism: life, family, and her art.

Catherine’s detachment from Ireland does not translate to all land. In fact, Catherine feels quite connected with Islay and with Glasgow. She has not lost her sense of place; rather, she has found it in an unexpected space. When Catherine lives on Islay, she adores her bungalow and the images of the island. She takes enjoyment of the horses next door and the tiny “mussel-blue” cove with a diving board to the other side of the house (141). The reader is given an appealing image of a quaint, country home:

She opened the curtains, hung just on a string, and looked out at the early summer’s day. The sun was bright. [. . .] The bungalow, at the edge of the town, overlooked the shore which was made up of stones, and nearer the sea, shingle. When the wind was in the right direction, she could hear the waves. (141-2)

Catherine carries this view of the simplicity of nature into her classroom. She notices that the children see “their remote surroundings [. . .] as a deprivation, not something to be enjoyed” (208). In order to teach her students about rhythm, Catherine uses the ocean as an example. She questions them about the different

time intervals of the sea, eventually drawing out answers of high and low tides, waves, and adds to their answers neap tides, ripples, equinoxes, and even storms. Catherine can see music in the ocean, the beauty of two different elements intertwined.

The tranquility and peacefulness evoked by Catherine's seaside villa image is eventually challenged by her intense postpartum depression, but the emotional connection to the sea is never lost completely, only covered by the dark clouds of her depression. Upon returning from County Derry, Catherine, reminiscing about her time in Kiev, examines a map of Europe and admits to herself, "It would have been hard to imagine living that far from the sea" (120). Catherine never fully explains her comment to herself; however, some of her other comments may shed light on why she feels this way. During her labor, after the nurse has given her some medication for pain, she makes a brief comment about Islay: "Islay was good—digging peats, the earth vibrating beneath their feet like a sprung floor. A communication. Like sound" (159). Catherine connects the island, surrounded by the sea, to communication, something that her music accomplishes as well. Communication connects people, and, as Catherine explores herself and her world, she comes to the conclusion that people are what matter, people are important. *Vernicle*, Catherine's masterpiece inspired during her seaside epiphany, is evidence of her desire for

people to act humanely by openly listening to each other and responding honestly, with the inclusion of the Protestant Lambeg drums as both negative and positive sounds. Christina Mahony states, “MacLaverty explores the tension between societal and political pressure and the individual conscience. The ideologue, whether religious, political, or cultural, has suppressed his or her innate humanity to serve that ideology” (239). She believes that MacLaverty’s characters who have maintained their humanity are required to “act in accordance with their personal beliefs and to treat others as individuals—not as the enemy or the other” (239). Catherine is able to act humanely, treating others as individuals as evidenced by her interactions with the Orangemen that play in *Vernicle*. Michael Lamb and Cal McCluskey were unable to act appropriately because they could not break free from the traditional Irish ideology associated with the land. Catherine’s connection to the sea, however, reaffirms her belief that individuals, so small and humble in comparison to the vastness of the sea, are important and worth personal attention.

The darkness that engulfs Catherine does not have the final victory because of her lingering connection to the sea and island. Her experience on the beach the day after Dave cuts her lip has a cleansing effect on Catherine, and shows her that she will be able to beat her depression, love her daughter without holding back, and write music again. The sea, as Kristin Morrison argues, serves

as a “witness and catalyst” (113) to the transformation that Catherine goes through as she lives on the island. Although Morrison pays closer attention to the marine imagery surrounding Catherine, she makes some insightful observations about the location of her epiphany: “Catherine has moved from County Derry to Glasgow by way of Islay, that Hebridean island lying north of both her childhood home and her adulthood city” (113). The beach is “truly a liminal space, the margin between earth and water” (114), but also serves as a psychologically liminal space. Catherine has placed herself, intentionally or not, in between who she was and who she will be.

Catherine is not caught up in the blackness of her own mind during this walk, as she normally is at the house, because of the openness of the beach landscape. She notices her environment, especially her proximity to Ireland:

To her left-hand side, the west, was the open ocean—to her right the beach, backed by tall sand-dunes with grey grass hissing in the dry wind, nothing else. The air was so clear that Ireland looked close, like a further headland rather than a different island. The Land of Saints and Scholars and Murderers. (204)

Catherine can physically see Ireland clearly from her position on the beach, a symbol that she can clearly see Ireland politically and culturally as well. The fog of sectarianism is lifted, and Catherine can see the ways in which both the Catholic and Protestant communities have fueled the violence of the Troubles. She can strip away stereotypes taught to her as a child and see the beauty in her

Northern Irish culture through child-like eyes. For example, *Vernicle*, inspired by her seaside stroll, uses the Lambeg drums, traditionally used in Orange marches, as sounds of both terror and joy. Although her father spoke negatively about the drums because of their connection to “sheer bloody bigotry” (8), Catherine can see and hear “the Lambegs stripped of their bigotry and [become] pure sound” (276). She can see them clearly, without prejudice, as Smyth notes:

it is only when she distances herself from Northern Ireland that Catherine can articulate the emotion she felt on first hearing the Lambeg drum during a childhood walk with her father. Because of her father’s relation to the drum’s sectarian heritage, the emotion could not be expressed without in some way denying him and in some respects herself. (19-20)

Catherine must remove herself from Northern Ireland in order to be able to express herself healthily and freely. In her distance from Ireland, she can reflect on her life and art without the repressive memories of her past as a Catholic in Northern Ireland.

Catherine finds a sense of physical freedom as she walks along the beach, which prepares the way for her to experience psychological freedom later in the day. Later, after Anna is born, Catherine remains in the house, caring for her child and trying to write music daily. Although she has time off from her job (twelve weeks), the reader never hears of her returning to work, and Anna is past three months of age. Catherine’s depression and circumstances have physically confined her to the interior of her bungalow. But after Dave hits her, she decides

to pack up Anna and take a walk on the beach so that she will not be around when Dave awakens. The beach becomes a place of refuge for her. As Catherine begins her walk down the shoreline, she notices her surroundings: oval stones, seaweed of all colors, flotsam and debris of nylon nets, plastic bottles, light bulbs, and bird feathers (204). The debris, though, is not a sign of desolation, as it was on the beach Michael Lamb and Brother Benedict walked. This debris is evidence of life, of children playing on the beach catching fish and crabs, of families sharing a picnic lunch, feeding birds the leftovers of their meal. And the farther Catherine walks, the cleaner the beach gets (204). She is leaving behind her community, the people who live on the island and all of their trash, and walking towards an individual, spiritual experience with nature.

As Catherine continues walking, she begins to strip off her clothing, piece by piece, symbolizing her removal of the elements of her past and present that confine her and hold her back. She first removes her sandals, holding them in her hand as she walks, and she feels the “firm sand in her bare feet” (204). Her footprints are “the only interruption to the sand as far as the eye could see” (204). This isolation is positive, allowing her to experience freedom. But it is not enough; she continues walking farther and farther away from civilization. She lets the air caress her body and decides that she is “wind-bathing” (205). Her

enjoyment of the natural elements is clear and refreshing, both for Catherine and the reader. It is a pure act in the elements of nature, reminiscent of childhood:

She held out her arms from her body so that the wind moved beneath her arms. It buffeted her, blowing her hair around her face, but she didn't bother. [. . .] She swung her arms at each step, stretched out her neck, shook her hair, made herself conscious of the air blowing around her. (205)

She remembers the chasing game she played as a child, and creates her own grown-up game to play on the beach now. She tries to walk forward with her eyes closed, "testing her bravery, her faith" in herself to walk confidently without sight (205). Although she is not very good, she has to open her eyes frequently, the active testing of her faith is a positive step in light of her earlier comments that morning that she cannot trust herself (202). She eventually strips off her skirt, which has become wet in the crashing waves, leaving it on a stone to dry, not even bothering to take her clothing with her as she continues: "She could pick it up on the way back, then her sandals—if she ever came back" (209).

The water of the beach physically and emotionally cleanses Catherine. During her walk, she stoops down and rinses her bruised mouth with the healing sea water. The salt, although it will burn, will help to heal the laceration on her mouth and prevent infection. The swim in the water with Anna, both of them naked and free, will help Catherine protect herself when her depression returns after she leave Islay for Glasgow and again when she returns to Northern



Ireland for her father's funeral. When Catherine becomes hungry, she stops walking and removes Anna from her back. She feeds Anna and removes her diaper when she notices that sand has invaded the sides of the diaper as well as her shirt. She places Anna in the shallow water where the waves lap in and watches her daughter splash and play. Anna's enjoyment of the water sparks something inside of Catherine and "suddenly from nowhere Catherine felt good" (211). This sudden feeling of happiness prompts her to strip off the rest of her own clothes and join Anna in the water, her abandonment of social decorum evidence of her joy.

As Catherine picks up Anna and wades to the deeper water, she experiences a type of baptism, as does Anna. The water is noticeably colder the deeper Catherine goes, causing her to gasp. But once she immerses herself and Anna in the water, "it didn't seem as cold. What had she been making such a fuss about?" (212). However, she soon moves to the shallower water, returning Anna to her previous place at the water's edge. As mother and daughter sit, Catherine for the first time enjoys her baby:

The baby sat four-square and grinned. Made noises with her mouth. Pre-speech, the books called it. She splashed flat hands down. Catherine laughed and hugged her. Then she sat back with her legs straight out to sea, her baby on her lap. She leaned back propped on her arms with her fingers wedged firmly in the sand. Each wave that ran in clucked beneath Anna, making the baby squeal with delight. It sounded almost like singing. [. . .] And she

felt so good that she was overcome by a fierce joy and tears sprang into her eyes. (212)

After this moment of joy and epiphany at the water's edge, Catherine and Anna return to their clothing and Catherine eats lunch, basking in the good weather and good feelings. As Catherine packs up their things to return home, she runs down to the water to wash off Anna's dirty top and, when she turns around, Anna is standing, ready to take her first step. Catherine is struck by awe, runs back to her daughter and offers up her hands as encouragement. Anna "step[s] shakily forward with her hands up—one, two steps and clamped on to Catherine's fingers" (215).

The feelings of despair and of darkness have been banished from this place through the connection between mother and daughter, both in the water and on the land. The hope that Catherine finds is quite a departure from the despair that follows both Michael Lamb and even Cal McCluskey. In a discussion on MacLaverty's early work, Gary Brienzo argues against critics like Margaret Scanlan who believe that MacLaverty's realism, while beautiful, offers "no solution to Northern Ireland's turmoil" (67). Writing in 1987, he believes the despair in MacLaverty's works can "be seen as the writer's developing skill in creating fictive escapes that become increasingly concrete and believable, and thus even more tragic when they inevitably fail in the Northern Ireland of today" (68). While Brienzo makes a strong argument in the cases of *Lamb* and *Cal*, his

thesis cannot be applied to *Grace Notes*. Catherine moves not towards the concrete, but the abstract, and as she moves away from Ireland, her story becomes less and less tragic, with great hope for her and her daughter when she returns to Glasgow after her father's funeral. It is her flight from Ireland that provides her with the possibility to succeed; she cannot thrive while living in Ireland.

The emotional healing that Catherine experiences with Anna allows her to begin to hear the first notes and melodies of her masterpiece, *Vernicle*. Catherine had been enjoying the silence of the beach, when "suddenly she heard a sound. A gentle tremolo of strings of different tones. But joined to it were a higher and lower octave building to a chord. These sounds lead to a brass idea. Trombones, tuba, trumpets. What a mysterious process it was" (213-4). The music she hears excites Catherine and continues to form itself in her mind. This musical breakthrough has special meaning to Catherine; it signifies a change in course for her, as did her burst of happiness watching Anna play. She is not a bad mother, nor will she be an unproductive artist. During her depression, Catherine could not compose, causing her to fear that she would never write music again: "It was as if [her depressive thoughts] strode in, slammed the door and said, 'Pay attention, when I'm around nothing, but nothing else happens. Nothing moves in or out. And as for anything to do with music—forget it'" (198). But the music

she hears in her head while at the beach changes those words, banishing them from her mind. Although she knows it is far too early in the composition process, she begins to think of names: "Metamorphoses. Reconciliation. [. . .] By the sea. At the water's edge. By the sea's edge. Yes, that was simple and good. By the Sea's Edge" (214). Catherine pays tribute to the environment in which music came back to her. The beach was necessary to the beginning of her recovery.

The shells on the beach Catherine picks up and collects serve as a natural symbol of her and her journey to health and musical inspiration. Often Catherine finds sand in her pockets from shells she has picked up as she walks along the shoreline. The shell imagery is not confined to one type of shell; rather, it includes different types such as the conch and the scallop. Russell discusses the beauty of the shell imagery within the novel at some length, arguing that the shell imagery is subtle and layered. According to Russell, the shell variously symbolizes Catherine's vocation, talent, depression, and pregnancy (211-215). He makes the point that the shell mindset enables Catherine to protect herself against harsh elements, such as her relationship with Dave and even her parents, although it also encourages her depression and feelings of despair: "By portraying Catherine as moving in the intimate space of her shell and by surrounding her with images of shells, MacLaverty suggests that her tough outward demeanor hides a creature who needs protection from forces that

would crush her” (214). The natural image of the shell, as Russell shows, is strongly associated with Catherine and reinforces the symbolic nature of the shell as well as the connection that she has with the beach and the ocean, even when she is not physically near the shore.

Maintaining her connection to the land of the island, Catherine’s latest musical work, *Vernicle*, is structured as a scallop shell (Russell 213). Equal in parts, the piece creates a mirror-image of itself to lead the listener down the path of depression she has been and back out; at least, Catherine “hoped it would have the bilateral symmetry of a scallop shell” (273). The natural shape of the scallop shells connects her musical rebirth to the emotional rebirth she felt on the open beach that day. The working title of her piece, *By the Sea’s Edge*, identifying where her source of inspiration came from, eventually turns into *Vernicle*, which was historically a badge brought back by pilgrims who had been to a holy shrine, as sign that they “had been where they said” (245). Catherine finds this information in a book titled *The Scallop* at an Oxfam bookstore on Islay. The scallop was the symbol of pilgrims who went to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and returning pilgrims “wore a scallop-shaped badge on their caps” (245). The symbolic and spiritual meanings resonate with Catherine: “The word appealed to her—it had a good ring to it. Proof that you’d been there.

In a land of devastation. At the bottom of the world. And come through it—just. She'd brought back evidence in the shape of a piece of music. Vernicle" (245).

Catherine has brought back evidence from her journey, focused most crucially on her journey through depression, but including her journey before Islay as well. She "has reached down into the tabernacle of herself for this music," which includes both her emotions and her experiences (271). *Vernicle* is influenced by every place that Catherine has been and evidence from those places and their essence is reflected in the music. She uses the influence of her international experiences in her life and her art. The spirit and pride of the Lambeg drums and the solemn remembrance of the Holocaust related in Kiev work together to create a beautiful piece of music that captures individuals' hearts and souls. Russell acknowledges Catherine's fluidity of identity, stating that she is "the kind of citizen who will hopefully emerge out of the context of the hope generated by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998" (219). She is not an isolated, inward Irishwoman; she is open to the world, to differences in thought, to differences in people. Nor is her music isolated or confined to the United Kingdom; it is being broadcast in places like Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Poland, and Portugal.

The international lands Catherine has journeyed through are not included in chronological order; instead, they are linked together thematically. At the first

note of *Vernicle's* production, Catherine instantly remembers the inspiration of her masterpiece, her day of epiphany on the beach with Anna. As the music begins, "a whispered five-note phrase on the violins and she was right back on that beach with her baby" (269). The music is faint, and Catherine imagines the audience's response: Did I hear something? Then the music begins to grow louder and darker. Catherine remembers her mother "plaiting bread. Her mother's hands, three pallid strands, pale fingers over and under, in and out" (270). The rhythm reminds Catherine of Ireland, of "ornament in the Book of Kells. Under and over, out and in. Like pale fingers interlocking in prayer. Grace notes with a vaguely Celtic flavor" (270). She connects her day at the beach with Anna to a day she had with her own mother. This portion of the music, Catherine declares, is the ascent, the climb upward. Her memories of the beach and of her childhood at home are remembered here as happy, although she does not ever gloss over the bad memories. She describes her music as simple and yet complex, as her day at the beach and her childhood were simple and complex. The first section supports her, just as the firm sand of the beach carried her that day.

As the music begins to change, Catherine and the audience are sharply thrown into the despair she felt during her depression. They have no time to enjoy the warmth of the beach sun or her memories: "The ascent is complete, the

climactic point is reached. But there is no vista from the top. Suddenly everything is cut short by the entrance of the Lambegs" (217). Their entrance is violent, "almost like machine-fire. A short burst—enough to kill and maim. Silence. It's the kind of silence induced by a slap in the face or the roarings of a drunk" (271). Catherine evokes the violence of the Northern Irish Troubles and the Holocaust, the violence of her home, and the violence of Dave. The sound of the drums hammering down the aisles is enough to create the same intense feelings of her depression, causing her to panic: "Oh Jesus. Even a memory of the blackness of her depression startles her" (272). As the Lambegs continue to play, the orchestra fights against them, trying to drown out their noise with the music of the opening, but they do not succeed. The Lambegs pound furiously and aggressively until the orchestra concedes victory and ceases to play.

The battle between the drums and the orchestra illustrates the lesson Catherine learned while in Kiev about how easily beauty can be stripped from the land through morally reprehensible actions of a government. Although she states that "she was not trying to copy the vulgarity of Shostakovitch's Seven—the march of the Nazis on Leningrad," she acknowledges that was the effect. Melnichuck taught her about the oppressive nature of the communist government and of the closing down of the churches and the despair that followed. The lesson that resonates most with Catherine is that of Babi Yar:



In 1941 the Nazis made all of the Jews of Kiev come together and they took them to Babi Yar — thirty-five thousand — men, women, children — and they shot them and put them down in a ravine to be buried. Evtushenko wrote a poem and Shostakovitch put it in a symphony. But the anti-Semites said not all the dead are Jews. There is Russian and other prisoners. [. . .] Dmitri Dmitriyevich was right — we must all fight anti-Semitism. The beginning of anti-Semitism is talk, is hatred — the end is Babi Yar. (126-7)

While Catherine does not presume to think that the Holocaust and the current Northern Irish Troubles are equivalent atrocities, Melnichuck's story of Babi Yar causes her to think of the places of death in her own country: "Cornmarket, Claudy, Teebane Crossroads, Six Mile Water, the Bogside, Greysteel, the Shankill Road, Long Kesh, Dublin, Darkley, Enniskillen, Loughinisland, Armagh, Monaghan town. [. . .] Birmingham, Guildford, Warrington" (127). The despair of truly seeing how humanity can treat each other is overwhelmingly strong for Catherine, causing her to link this memory from her time in the Ukraine with her despair of her inward depression, and at the lowest point of her symphony.

However, her memories of Kiev are not completely negative, just as her memories of Northern Ireland are not completely negative. As the third movement begins, it mimics the beginning of the first movement, with the exception of the bells. Unbeknownst to the audience, the bells are the sound Catherine remembers most fondly from Kiev. The memories of the bells of Kiev strive to bring Catherine and the audience out of the despair created by the memory of Babi Yar: "Small sharp raps of the wooden hammer playing a clarion

call of seven notes. A bright hard sound, as if heard at some distance over ice. A statement that sounded out, remembered from the bell tower in Kiev" (274). The bells also draw Catherine back to the sea: "Sound shaking the blood from the walls of her womb. The rhythm of a woman's life is synchronized with the moon and the moon is synchronized with the sea, ergo—a woman is synchronized with the tides" (274). The strings come in and create sounds of "descending leaps, swoops" (274), reminding Catherine of her childhood again. The sound of her feet as they climbed the slide at the playground was pleasant to her ears. These two sounds, of the bells and the strings, are sounds of hope to Catherine and "gradually the horror of the first movement falls away, is forgotten" (274).

The final movement reintroduces the Lambeg drums of Catherine's homeland, proving that Catherine has begun to create a positive relationship with Northern Ireland. This time the drums are not instruments of despair and destruction but joy. Russell explains this difference in tone: "The second half of the program concludes with Lambeg drumming, but because of a change in the preceding music, the sound is now joyful" (228). Preceded by the third movement, which included the happy music of the bells and the complex ability of music to "say two or more things at once," like homophones, the Lambegs evoke two contrasting feelings in one symphony (275). Whereas the first experience of the Lambegs was horrifically frightful, this experience is joyful:

“On this accumulating wave the drumming has a fierce joy about it. Exhilaration comes from nowhere. The bell-beat, the slabs of brass, the whooping of the horns, the battering of the drums. Sheer fucking unadulterated joy” (276). The description of the drums this time reminds Catherine and the reader of the suddenly and unrestrainable joy she feels on the beach, which is a fitting place to end her pilgrimage through sound, because it was at the beach that Catherine found peace with her daughter and her music after the darkest part of her depression. She knows this truth and thinks to herself as the music begins to fade: “Catherine Anne’s vision. A joy that celebrates being human. A joy that celebrates its own reflection, its own ability to make joy. To reproduce” (276).

MacLaverty’s weaving of multiple cultures and places into Catherine’s music illustrates his novelistic journey from the romantic view of Ireland and the land that plagued Michael Lamb and Cal McCluskey towards a new sense of freedom in the rapidly globalizing world. Catherine discovers the land of other nations can provide inspiration, like the beach on the island of Islay. The city, as well, begins to gain influence, weakening some of the power of the countryside. Glasgow, not her hometown, is where Catherine writes her masterpiece, although she is inspired at the beach and heard the first wisps of the music while sitting in the sand. But maybe most important, the land does not influence this novel like it did in *Lamb* and *Cal*; it does not have the power to define a person.

The land with all its communal connections is replaced by music, which is intensely personal. While Catherine and her mother walk through the forest bordering her hometown, they discuss music and get into a fairly heated debate. Mrs. McKenna trashes current music, stating, "I just don't understand music nowadays. It all sounds the same" (88). Catherine responds by telling her mother that she does not understand the music because she does not listen (88), which understandably angers her mother. Catherine, however, believes that her music, her individual creation, defines her as a human being (128), not her identification with a certain geographically defined community. The individual, not the community, is paramount, although MacLaverty does not believe in the individual at the cost of the community. Examples of this truth abound in his short stories, especially in his collections *A Time to Dance* (1982) and *Matters of Life and Death* (2006).

Catherine's community is international and cross-cultural, comprised of people from many nations, specifically musicians. Her mentors are Chinese, Ukrainian, Irish, English, Scottish, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and agnostic. Every person in Catherine's cosmopolitan community causes her to think about herself and her homeland differently, seeing the positive and negative aspects to create a richer, deeper identity than narrow characters like Michael Lamb and Cal McCluskey. MacLaverty admits that he too has been influenced by an

international group of writers, such as Dostoyevsky, Mann, Kafka, and Faulkner, as well as Joyce and Heaney, and his early encouragement came from The Belfast Group, composed of primarily Northern Irish writers. As many critics have argued, music is religion for Catherine, creating a boundary-crossing way of connecting with people. MacLaverty chooses literature as his way of connecting with people different than himself.



A transnational identity, established in *Grace Notes*, gave MacLaverty the freedom to move his literary setting back to Northern Ireland and into the city completely without being labeled a “Northern Irish writer.” His most recent novel, *The Anatomy School* (2001), has very little connection with the physical land, the countryside, or the nation of Ireland as a whole. The causes for this abrupt split are only speculation. MacLaverty might have felt he had exhausted the theme of the land in his first three novels, completing what he had to say in *Grace Notes*. This last novel also has a very heavy Joycean influence, which may have inclined him to leave out the land and focus on the city, as Joyce does. Possibly MacLaverty just wanted to write something different, and this novel is a very different, which is the reason for its exclusion in this thesis. Whatever the cause, *The Anatomy School* is mainly an urban Bildungsroman.

Unlike *Lamb* and *Cal*, *Grace Notes* moves quickly into an explanation of the abstract nature of the land, expanding its definition while at the same time bringing a new sense of sophistication to an oftentimes provincial theme in Irish literature. Catherine's sense of place is not connected to a specific land, but rather to a psychological place that she carries with her where she goes. She creates the perfect "land" through her experiences in Eastern Europe, Scotland, and even Northern Ireland, illustrating MacLaverty's belief in the need to move beyond physical borders in order to find peace and fulfillment.

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