

**‘THEM WAS THE DAYS’: MALIGNANT NOSTALGIA IN PATRICK  
MCCABE’S *THE BUTCHER BOY*<sup>12</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Nostalgia etymologically corresponds to a longing for returning to a euphoric place or time in past. In some cases (i.e. post-traumatic states), the acuteness of nostalgic feelings is pathologically aggravated so as to lead individual to some belligerent and even delinquent conducts. This sort of a ‘malignant’ nostalgia is delineated by Patrick McCabe, a pre-eminent contemporary Irish novelist, in his most acclaimed novel, *The Butcher Boy* (1992). McCabe’s protagonist, the schoolboy Francie Brady, undergoes a series of traumatic incidents triggered by his dysfunctional family, hypocritical and self-centered milieu and the corrupt public institutions. This paper, suggesting that nostalgia becomes a pathology in Francie’s case, discusses the ways in which Francie, being overcome with a pathetic obsession to bring the past back, loses his touch with the reality of the present.. This paper also argues that the protagonist’s domestic sense of nostalgia represents a longing for reattaining traditional Irish identity.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia, Irishness, *The Butcher Boy*, obsession, delusion

**PATRICK MCCABE’İN *THE BUTCHER BOY* ADLI ROMANINDA  
KÖTÜCÜL NOSTALJİ**

**Öz**

Nostalji, etimolojik olarak, bireyin, kendisine mutluluk veren bir yere veya zamana dönme arzusu anlamına gelir. Travma sonrası gibi bazı durumlarda ise nostaljik duyguların şiddeti, patolojik seviyeye ulaşarak bireyi saldırgan ve suç nitelikli davranışlara yöneltebilir. Önde gelen çağdaş İrlandalı romancılar arasında yer alan Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* (1992) adlı romanında, bu tür, ‘kötücül’ bir nostalji duygusunu tasvir eder. Romanın ana karakteri Francie Brady, bozuk aile yapısı, bencil ve ikiyüzlü çevresi ve yozlaşmış devlet kurumlarının sebep olduğu bir dizi travmatik

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olayla karşılaşır. Bu anlamda, bu çalışma, nostalji kavramının, Francie'nin durumunda bir patolojiye dönüştüğünü savunmakta ve onun, geçmişi geriye getirme arzusunun bir saplantıya dönüşerek kendisini hangi açılardan bunalıma sürüklediğini açıklamaktadır. Bu çalışma ayrıca, ana karakterin ailevi anlamdaki nostalji hissinin, geleneksel İrlanda kimliğine yeniden ulaşma özlemini temsil ettiğini ileri sürmektedir.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Nostalji, İrlandalılık, *Kasap Çırağı*, saplantı, sanrı

### Introduction

Patrick McCabe (1955-) is frequently labelled by literary critics as the writer of 'Bog Gothic', a term suggesting McCabe's deftness in blending qualities of Gothic fiction with narratives structured upon the life in rural or provincial Ireland. The term is attributed to McCabe particularly in association with the appalling content of *The Butcher Boy*, the author's *magnum opus*. The fact that the novel is imbued with physical and mental terror haunting the community of a small Irish town attests to the 'bog-gothicness' identified with McCabe. However, the ways he employs to evoke senses of fright and suspense hardly let him be considered as a writer of Gothic fiction in conventional sense; rather than heavily drawing on dark, mysterious and gruesome locales or paranormal/supernatural occurrences and figures as inducers of uncanny feelings, McCabe's fictional landscape in *The Butcher Boy* is saturated with mundanity as much as moral corruption. On a great scale, it is the graphic accounts of a socially isolated and mentally impaired youth's 'barbarous' conducts what renders McCabe's novel Gothic. Such settings as unnerving castles and shadowy forests, which are emblematic of Gothic genre, are, in *The Butcher Boy*, represented by the disordered mind and tenebrous inner state of Francie Brady, the schoolboy protagonist of the novel. Being ruled by delusions and fantasies as a consequence of growing up in a dysfunctional family and a self-centred community, Francie commits a series of horrifying acts of violence and ends up in a mental hospital. In a way, he is transformed into a 'monster' with a deep mental perturbation as well as immensely minacious capabilities. This transformation, upon which the plotline of the novel is established, is largely generated by Francie's pathetically acute sense of nostalgia that, as will be elaborated, becomes a pathology in the course of the novel.

*The Butcher Boy* begins with grown-up Francie's retrospective glance at his childhood; but, rather than employing an adult's perspective, he, intentionally or compulsively, gives the account of his childhood through his point of view as a child. Being, to a great extent, a palpable figure of McCabe's own childhood, Francie tells of his life within a turbulent family atmosphere as well as at the small, provincial Irish town where he is pushed into further dejection. Even though the novel exhibits the qualities of picaresque,

Bildungsroman and, as already stated, Gothic tradition, explicit manifestations of Francie's mental breakdown let it be considered as a psychological novel as well. His deformed mental state is the outcome of a chain of traumatic events which are basically engendered by his alcoholic father's aggression. Francie's only sources of solace in the outer world are his angelic mother, his only friend, Joe Purcell, and to some extent, his uncle Alo; T.V. and comic books also function to mitigate the depression Francie undergoes. Yet, all of these persons and objects are progressively taken away from him only to leave him in a pathetic state of solitariness and to lead him to his inner space dominated by fantasies and delusions. In this respect, *The Butcher Boy* can be construed as the narrative of Francie's struggles to bring back what he intensely longs for; that is, domestic happiness and his fraternal friendship with Joe. However, as he fails in each of his attempts and as the community, with its hypocritical, materialistic and selfish attitude towards him exacerbates his inner anguish, he clings to the visions of what he yearns for. In other words, Francie's severe nostalgia, which initially gives him a temporary relief, malignantly replaces the reality for him. In this regard, an exploration of the process in which nostalgic feelings pathologically predominate over individual psychology will contribute to gaining a proper insight into Francie's destructive efforts to re-establish his past.

### **Nostalgia as a Pathology**

Formed by the Greek words *nostos* (meaning return home) and *algos* (meaning pain), nostalgia is a word "introduced by J. Hofer (1678), in the late seventeenth century, as a literal translation into Greek of the German *heimweh* and, like the latter, [it] means a painful yearning for home or country" (Werman, 1977, p. 387). In a broader sense, as Arthur G. Nikelly suggests, nostalgia "is a yearning for persons, places, and symbols of the past" and it is felt especially at the moments of "feeling small, powerless, and subordinate, and facing a bleak future" (Nikelly, 2004, p. 184-185). This sort of a "detachment from the present as an adaptive response to social stress" by "looking back toward pleasant times and places provides temporary solace and security and serves as a defense against the threat of alienation" (Nikelly, 2004, p. 185). Thus, sense of nostalgia occurs in direct relation to external adversities that exert such a negative influence on individual's present mood that he/she turns to the pleasant memories of the past as a possible way of attaining a shelter and mitigating his/her distress. However, as the pressure on individual's psychology escalates, a fixation with the past develops and his/her sense of nostalgia comes to a state of a psychopathological routine. Regarding morbid nostalgia, Harvey A. Kaplan argues as follows:

In pathological nostalgia there is a longing for the past without the acceptance that it is over. [...] the mood serves denial and the feeling tone is only one of elation. In this sense, it becomes a screen function in which the objects of nostalgic attachment are condensations of childhood values, derivatives of early fantasies that are used to idealize the past, preventing movement toward the future (Kaplan, 1978, p. 465).

In other words, the nostalgic person's state of being profoundly preoccupied with the past progressively disconnects him from the reality of the present and causes him to suffer what Arthur G. Nikkely calls "nostalgia syndrome". As Nikelly indicates, nostalgia "becomes pathological when nostalgic persons derive greater gratification from the past than from the present or the future and when physical and psychological features are intense, obsessive, and longstanding and prevent effective coping" (Nikelly, 2004, p. 188). Symptoms of nostalgia syndrome are exhibited with the nostalgic person's "hallucinatory scenes of the home" and "inappropriate acting-out behavior in order to escape the painful experience of being away and as an incentive to return home" (Nikelly, 2004, p. 188). Furthermore, George Rosen, who investigates the history of nostalgia as a psychological disorder, highlights the significance of individual's solitary and isolated situation in the outer world as a cause of pathological nostalgia; according to him, nostalgia is "a psychopathological condition affecting individuals who are uprooted, whose social contacts are fragmented, who are isolated and who feel totally frustrated and alienated" (Rosen, 1975, p. 340).

Nostalgia syndrome, thus formulated, is what is suffered by Francie Brady in *The Butcher Boy*. His abnormal yearning for the past, which can be regarded as an outcome of his broken ties with the community as well as his family, drives him to vain attempts to bring back what he lost. McCabe gives the account of these attempts through the darkly humorous perspective of the sufferer, which, in fact, situates his work in a distinctive place in contemporary Irish fiction.

### **An Irish Butcher Boy in the Abyss of Nostalgia**

The malignancy of Francie's sense of nostalgia is involved with that he is in an irrational effort to re-establish the gratifying moments and personal ties he previously had (Ersöz, 2019, p. 241). His nostalgic relationship with his past corresponds to what Svetlana Boym defines as "restorative nostalgia" which "puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (Boym, 2001, p. 41). In Francie's case, this act of restoration is three-dimensional: as the child protagonist of the novel he wishes to re-establish his lost friendship with Joe and the state of domestic warmth which, he believes,

he had before his father's alcoholic state and the troubles with the Nugents began. Such an ambition of the protagonist is closely tied to the other major nostalgia metaphorically discoursed in the novel; that is, the restoration of traditional Ireland which accentuates such spiritual issues as friendship, love of family and patriotic feelings. One other aspect of Francie's nostalgia, which indicates its obsessive and vehement quality, is that, decades after his childhood, as an adult confined to a mental hospital, he still tries to revive the days of his friendship with Joe; at the very end of the novel, he reanimates the moment of his meeting with Joe, but this time, with one of the patients.

Francie's mental downfall is largely engendered by paternal maltreatment. His father, Benny, plays the trumpet at local pubs and earns too little to make a living for his family. Having been left at an industrial school with his brother when he was a child, Benny is unable to overcome his sense of inferiority and shame. He drinks heavily to forget his past and he is characterized as a cantankerous husband and indifferent father. His extreme aggression impairs the psychology of Annie, Francie's mother, in such a serious way that she is hospitalized for mental treatment. Benny's pugnacity also brings Francie and his mother closer to each other; the protagonist, feeling guilty for being of no help to his mother, regards her as the only source of love, affection and protection. Due to intolerable uneasiness and anxiety at home and partly to the lack of paternal discipline, Francie spends most of his time in the outside and enjoys playing games and reading comic books with Joe; the two boys, with a euphoric sense of freedom, play games and wander around a river bank where they build a hide for themselves. However, their ebullience is damaged when they take Philip Nugent's comic books away. The Nugents are an upper-middle class family who have recently moved to the town after having lived in England for years. Mrs. Nugent, a disdainful and overly protective mother, calls on Francie's house and not only berates his mother but insults his whole family calling them pigs as follows:

She said she knew the kind of us long before she went to England and she might have known not to let her son anywhere near the likes of me what else would you expect from a house where the father's never in, lying about the pubs from morning to night, he's no better than a pig. ... After that ma took my part and the last thing I heard was Nugent going down the lane and calling back Pigs -- *sure the whole town knows that!* (McCabe, 1992, p. 4)

This incident traumatizes Francie because from this point on he develops a profound sense of inferiority, as his father had done, and feels stigmatized as a pig. He considers that his uncle Alo, who would be visiting his family for Christmas, could reverse the situation. Alo is a well-known and respected figure in the neighbourhood for his ostensible success in

England and therefore his coming exhilarates Francie; he thinks that he would prove Mrs. Nugent and the whole town that he and his family are not 'pigs'. Yet, after the Christmas party, attended by Alo as well as some neighbours, the savagely fierce and ill-tempered manner of Francie's father against Alo drives the latter out. Francie's mother cries out and goes into another depression; Francie, being severely dismayed and dejected, escapes from home early in the morning and walks so far away as to reach Dublin. Francie's suffering of malignant nostalgia firstly appears during this escape. He goes into a church, sits at a chair and remembers the first time he met with Joe and the happy days they had together: "they were the best days, them days with Joe. They were the best days I ever knew, before da and Nugent and all this started" (McCabe, 1992, p. 40). Nostalgia reigns over Francie's psyche and gives him such a pleasure that he lingers at the church for a long time. He comes back to the present only when a priest talks to him; and only at that moment he realizes that he was crying.

Francie undergoes another trauma when he returns to the town and learns that his mother committed suicide. Furthermore, his father implicitly blames him for his mother's death even though he is the one who, with his bad-temper and acts of violence, drives his wife to mental breakdown. However, Francie interiorizes his father's unjust accusation and feels guilty as follows: "I knew one thing. As long as I walked the streets under them stars there'd be only one thing anyone could say about me and that was: I hope he's proud of himself now, the pig, after what he did on his poor mother" (McCabe, 1992, p. 44). Thus, being haunted by feelings of inferiority and guilt, Francie, in turn, deems the Nugents responsible for what happened to him and harshly attacks Philip. Being psychologically deformed, he trespasses into the Nugents' house and damages their property, as a result of which he is sent to an industrial school. Yet, the industrial school, run by priests, adds to his distress rather than providing him with a proper education. He is sexually abused by one of the priests and, on account of the school administration's fear of being scandalized, he is permitted to leave the school. Back in the town, Francie is treated by the community with prejudice as a wayward boy who is disregarded and abhorred. He meets with Joe, the only figure he could get emotional support, and tells him about his experience at the industrial school, which alienates the latter from the protagonist. When Francie gets into a fight with Mrs. Nugent's cousin, his aggressive and cruel manner ends his friendship with Joe.

Being thus left alone, Francie, rather than leaving the past behind, gets progressively controlled by his nostalgic feelings and fantasies for resettling his friendship with Joe and

restoring the imagined happiness of his family. As indicative of malignant nostalgia's rule over his psyche, he obsessively tracks Joe in order to regain 'the old happy days' with him; he cleans up the house and puts the TV, which was shattered by his father, back at the same place where it used to be. He pathetically believes that he could bring the life once he had back. The hold of this pathological effort to revive the past on him is so intense that he compulsively denies the realities of the present. He does not realize that his father, sitting at the sofa at home, is actually dead; he talks to his father's dead body and promises that he would work at the butcher's shop and recover everything; and thus, he becomes the butcher boy.

Francie's agony is aggravated when he witnesses that Joe and Philip Nugent have become friends. He begins to drink alcohol and gets further immersed into his fantasies which turn into delusions. In a way, Francie's case is a repetition of his parents' fate; the alcoholic father and mentally disordered mother are reincarnated and reunified in the form of the son. His sense of nostalgia malignantly operates and leads him to believe in the reality of his delusions which enable him to reverse the Christmas party so as to conciliate his father and uncle Alo and to attain the domestic gaiety he longs for. In such a delusional state, he is found by the town's doctor and policemen together with his father's decaying body and gets hospitalized.

Yet, just as the industrial school fails to be of any help to Francie, the treatment he gets at the mental hospital remains insufficient to recover him. Shortly after being discharged from the hospital, he is once again steered by his inner urge to re-establish the past. He takes on a journey on bike which he stole to see Joe, who is at a boarding school in Bundoran, the town where Francie's parents spent their assumedly happy honeymoon. Therefore, the journey represents Francie's another struggle to be reconnected with the figures who let him be endowed with the feelings of affection, protection and belonging to the outer world. However, once again, he is frustrated to learn that his father had always abused his wife since the beginning of their marriage. Hence, the past of his parents, considered by Francie as the moment and space of solidarity and serenity, turns out to be only an extension of the misery of the present. In a state of profound mental distress and vexation, Francie goes to Joe's school as a final attempt to restore the past. Yet, he is pushed into further distress when Joe, once his blood brother, despises him in disgust and denies that he knows him. In a state of poignant mental collapse, Francie goes back to the town on foot; assuming that it is Mrs. Nugent who devastated his life, he collects the captive bolt pistol, the butcher's steel and knife

from the butcher's shop and brutally kills Mrs. Nugent. The murder can be considered as another act driven by Francie's pathological nostalgia; because for him, Mrs. Nugent's absence equals to the time before the trouble with the Nugents started. Thus, nostalgia remains to be Francie's only way of escape from external oppression and inner distress; however, as he gets further immersed into his nostalgic fantasies he begins to believe that he could actualize his dreams. In the end, nostalgia, which, in Francie's case, corresponds to his yearning for the reestablishment of his domestic solidarity and fraternal ties with Joe, malignantly leads him to insanity as well as a series of delinquent acts such as assault, theft and housebreaking. In other words, his obsession with resuscitating the past and his failure to acknowledge the impossibility of actualizing this ambition catalyse his aggression and cause him to be delusional.

### **Francie Brady: A Foreigner in His Hometown**

A significant reason for the intensity of Francie's longing for an idealized past is his present unhappiness which is caused by not only domestic dysfunctionality but social indifference and hypocrisy as well. He imagines a happy past and fervently wishes to regain it because, as he gets lonelier, he feels as a stranger in the outer world of his present time. Regarding nostalgia's occurrence as a result of being situated at a foreign land, Johannes Hoffer argues in his *Dissertatio Medica De Nostalgia, Oder Heimwehe* (1678) as follows:

The persons most susceptible to this disease [nostalgia] are young people living in foreign lands, and among them especially those who at home lead a very secluded life and have almost no social intercourse. When such individuals, even well-bred children, come among other peoples, they are unable to accustom themselves to any foreign manners and way of life, nor to forget the maternal care received. They are apprehensive and find pleasure only in sweet thoughts of the fatherland until the foreign country becomes repugnant to them, or suffering various inconveniences they think night and day of returning to their native land and when prevented from so doing, they fall ill. (quot. Rosen, 1975, p. 341)

It is precisely this sense of being left at a foreign place what renders Francie's nostalgic feelings so abnormal as to be called pathological. The community of the small town where Francie resides is in the process of undergoing a radical socio-cultural change. As a projection of Ireland's modernization and liberalization appearing in the early 1960s, McCabe's fictional landscape in *The Butcher Boy* is populated by figures who adapt to a new lifestyle characterized by materialism and consumerism. Francie, on the other hand, is still largely attached to traditional Irish identity highlighted by, as Tom Inglis argues, being easy going and caring as well as a deep devotion to family, community and the Church: "the traditional



image of the Irish", Inglis suggests, involves "a greater interest in the spirit of things — that is, in being social, cultural and artistic, rather than having a selfish concern for material success" (Inglis, 1998, p. 243).

Francie's identification with Ireland is made clear throughout the novel with explicit symbols and metaphors. Even though he has an interest in the products of the Western and American world (such as comics and films) he is an Irish boy in traditional sense as his strong commitment to his family, friend and the nature of his country indicate. The walks he fondly takes with Joe on the mountains and at the riverbank as well as the Irish ballads he and his family sing at the Christmas party are some of the signs pointing to that he is still attached to traditional Irishness. Even his sense of shame and inferiority for being derogatorily likened to a pig represents a whole Irish nation's trauma for being humiliated in the same way by the colonizer England. Because, as Eamonn Jordan indicates, "classical British stereotypes have long associated the Irish with pigs. Victorian representations of Ireland used illustrations of the Irish families sharing living spaces with pigs, as indications of the lack of civilization amongst the Irish" (Jordan, 2006, p. 191). The environment encircling him, on the other hand, not only lacks such a traditional concern, but it is characterized by materialism and the importance it attaches to social status; such residents of the town as Mrs. Connolly, Doctor Roche and Mr. Purcell lack authenticity and treat Francie in a hypocritical and disdainful manner. Even Leddy, the owner of the butcher's shop, establishes his own superiority by disparaging Francie. This hostility in the outlook of the socioeconomically altered community causes Francie to feel alienated; that is, physically he is in his hometown but mentally and spiritually he feels being located at a foreign land where he is unfamiliar to the predominating selfishness and inauthenticity. Regarding Francie's commitment to the traditional image of Ireland and his failure to fit into the newly emerging, modern one, McCabe states as follows:

A feeling that something totally new is happening - but it hasn't really taken hold yet. That's what I remember. To some extent, the Francie character has a foot in either camp. He's growing up in his mother's and father's time – and also, if things had gone a bit better for him, he'd have moved into the exciting, kaleidoscopic world of Ireland as it is now. (McCabe, 1993, p. 10)

However, Francie is unable to get integrated into the world surrounding him. Being already left by his parents, uncle and friend, Francie is further frustrated to witness communal deceitfulness and insincerity; at one point, as indicator of the community's egocentric and condescending attitude, he is disgusted by the manner of Mrs. Connolly who expects to be acclaimed for cleaning Francie's house. Hence, Francie's sense of nostalgia, in a broader

aspect, represents a longing for traditional Ireland. As Liam Harte indicates, he is "a youth who is himself homesick on every level, possessed of a visceral, insatiable nostalgia for the protective nurture of Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mother, as much as that of the woman who gave birth to him" (Harte, 2014, p. 90). However, just as Francie's assumption of his parents' postnuptial felicity emerges to be only a misjudgement, his implicit sense of belonging to and longing for the Ireland of his parents' time is of delusive quality. The nostalgia he feels in sociocultural and national sense is in fact "for a time and place that never was, an illusory golden age of Irish cultural innocence and bucolic simplicity" (Harte, 2014, p. 90). To clarify, Harte asserts that Ireland never became the idyllic and self-sufficient country structured by de Valera upon simplicity and spirituality. Throughout the post-war years and the 1950s, Ireland experienced mass emigration which resulted with extreme poverty and insufficient living conditions; in spite of de Valera's thrilling aspirations, "it was evident that Irish citizens would not accept living standards that were significantly inferior to other Western nations" (Daly, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, Francie's innocent idealization of his family's past draws a parallel with his romantic attitude to his country's past. Ironically, and sadly for Francie, even at the present time the same parallelism continues to exist; domestically, he is frustrated by an alcoholic father and a mentally disordered mother; and socially, he is dejected by a hypocritical community and morally corrupt public institutions.

### Conclusion

In *The Butcher Boy*, Patrick McCabe depicts an Irish boy's victimization and dehumanization by his family, the society and public institutions; the severe inner pain and mental torment inflicted on Francie (and also on his family) is directly related with his sensitivity and vulnerability to society's prejudices, assumptions and judgements. Francie Brady's isolated, estranged and frustrated state within the small-town community where he is treated as an inferior being engenders his intense longing for what he lost as well as his struggles to return or re-establish 'home'. His sense of nostalgia, which grows pathological as a result of domestic distress and social iniquities, inimically operates to make him fixated on a lost past. It provides him with an idyllic space and time; and it is precisely such an idealized past life where Francie incarcerates himself and feels a belonging to. For this reason, the investigation of the ways in which Francie is trapped by the dark abyss of his nostalgic feelings is of paramount significance to have full insight into McCabe's masterpiece. Through the poignant story of Francie Brady as a forlorn figure whose only source of relief is the pleasant visions of an exalted past appearing to him in the form of delusions and fantasies,

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McCabe manifests the stigmatization and eventual victimization of a smart Irish youth by the people and state of his own country which was once described as the land of saints and scholars.

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