overSEAS 2015

This thesis was submitted by its author to the School of English and American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. It was found to be among the best theses submitted in 2015, therefore it was decorated with the School's Outstanding Thesis Award. As such it is published in the form it was submitted in **overSEAS 2015** (http://seas3.elte.hu/overseas/2015.html)

EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

Rejtett narratívák Medbh McGuckian költészetében
Hidden Narratives in Medbh McGuckian's Poetry

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2015

A HKR 346. § ad 76. § (4) c) pontja értelmében:
„… A szakdolgozathoz csatolni kell egy nyilatkozatot arról, hogy a munka a hallgató saját szellemi terméke…”

SZERZŐSÉGI NYILATKOZAT

Alulírott ..... FEKETE-NAGY FANNI .....(név)

..... 0721w0 .....(Neptun-kód) ezennel kijelentem és aláírásommal megerősítem, hogy az

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írt jelen szakdolgozatom saját szellemi termékem, melyet korábban más szakon még nem nyújtottam be szakdolgozatként/záródolgozatként és amelybe mások munkáját (könyv, tanulmány, kézirat, internetes forrás, személyes közlés stb.) idézőjel és pontos hivatkozások nélkül nem építettem be.

Budapest, 2015. 04. 09.

Fekete-Nagy Fanni

a hallgató aláírása

A nyilatkozatot a szakdolgozathoz kell csatolni.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Medbh McGuckian is one of the most influential and eminent poets of the contemporary Northern Irish literary scene. Her poetry is intriguing and divisive. She was first recognized as a poet in 1979, when she won the National Poetry Competition with a poem entitled "Flitting." Her first collection appeared in 1982 and she has been publishing poetry frequently ever since, her most recent collection is *The High Caul Cap* (2012). She has won a number of literary prizes including The Cheltenham Award, The Rooney Prize, The Forward Prize for Best Poem and the American Ireland Fund Literary Award. She has been a Writer-in-Residence at the University of Ulster and at Queens University Belfast, where she currently teaches Creative Writing.

The richness of her poetry offers a number of areas for study and research. In my thesis I chose to explore the narratives that can be traced in a number of her poems. Although Peggy O'Brien claimed in an essay of hers that "every McGuckian poem requires that a story be made up to explain its ellipses and contradictions" (242), this is a feature of Medbh McGuckian's poetry that has not been studied extensively and conclusively; in fact, it has rarely been given attention by her critics. My claim is that narratives and the stories of life events, which are woven into many of her poems, play a crucial role in the interpretation and analysis of these poems. I will demonstrate possible ways in which these narratives can be unravelled from the intricate imagery through the close reading of four poems (the texts can be found in the Appendix). While analysing them I aim to stay as close to the texts themselves as possible, but I have also taken into consideration existing readings of the poems. By revealing the hidden narratives in the texts, I attempt to give new readings of the chosen poems. This has also allowed me either to support or to challenge existing readings and to reinterpret the poems under discussion.

It is necessary to emphasize that I will not argue whether or not these poems are autobiographical. This seems to be a delicate topic regarding Medbh McGuckian's poetry. Certain critics, like Peggy O'Brian, declare that "only a fool would call them [the poems] autobiography" (244), while others, for example Leontia Flynn, frequently refer to relevant autobiographical details in her analyses. To avoid the question whether the 'I' in the poems is the poet herself or some other poetic persona, I have used the term *speaker* as the poems often resemble monologues and frequently have an addressee as well.

The four poems I have chosen are from the earliest part of McGuckian's *oeuvre*: one from each of her first four collections. One reason I have chosen these poems is availability of secondary literature; much more secondary material has been written about Medbh McGuckian's earlier collections than about her more recent volumes. Another reason is to demonstrate that narratives have been present in her poetry from the very beginning and continue to be a characteristic feature in her work. By analysing these poems in their chronological order I have also been able to show how these hidden narratives have developed through time: they have become more complex and the way in which they are imbedded into the poems has changed with time as well. In spite of the differences, these four poems display a number of common features. I will attempt to identify these and use them to draw general conclusions regarding the significance of hidden narratives in Medbh McGuckian's poetry.

"THE HOLLYWOOD BED"

"The Hollywood Bed" appeared in Medbh McGuckian's first full-length collection, *The Flower Master and Other Poems* (1982). In her analysis of the collection, Leontia Flynn points out that the themes of theatre and stagecraft reappear several times in *The Flower Master* (29). "The Hollywood Bed," for instance, plays with the themes of films, actors, and acting in accordance with its title. This topic is made clear at the beginning of the poem: "You adopt / your mask, your intellectual cradling of the head, / neat as a notepaper in your creaseless / envelope of clothes." This passage creates a very strong image of acting and pretence. The references to paper and writing (e.g.: notepaper, envelope) combined with Hollywood and acting create the impression that the poem is about two actors practicing their scripts. Yet the slightly sarcastic tone may raise the reader's suspicion that not all things are as they seem. However, the poem is much more than an exploration of acting, pretence and insincerity. When read carefully, it reveals a portrait or a story of a male-female relationship.

To construct a plausible reading of the poem, one must first try to identify the speaker. The speaker is most probably a woman – the main evidence for this is the expression "my tightened bud" where 'bud' meaning an unopened flower is an obvious feminine metaphor. The 'you' in the poem is once referred to as "some Columbus," very clearly a man. References to *house* and home prevail in the poem, but there can be more to these domestic images than a mere allusion to the married state of the couple. The first line "[w]e narrow into the house, the room, the bed" conveys a growing sense of confinement as the space of the house closes in on the couple. The central image of the bed, which should be a place of intimacy, becomes the setting for the depiction of the dynamics of relationship in this marriage.

"The Hollywood Bed" contains several clues that the speaker's relationship with her husband is far from ideal. There are no references to speech in the poem at all. This implies

the lack of true communication between the two people. Furthermore, there is a recurring theme of power and force in the poem. The images used reveal the *power relations* of the couple clearly. The verb 'blew open' is the first reference to force or violence, which is then reinforced by the lines "like some Columbus mastering / the saw-toothed waves," once again quite an aggressive image. If this were not enough to show the superiority of the husband, another piece of evidence can be found on the linguistic level of the poem. Altogether there are twelve second person pronouns (you, your) as opposed to the five first person pronouns (I, my, me), which also emphasizes the inequality within the relationship.

In Alexander Gonzalez's reading of the poem, the couple's relationship has 'narrowed down' in the course of several years of marriage. He claims that "[t]he behaviour exhibited by the spouses in the bed reflects their past and present levels of physical and emotional intimacy," which is best represented by their sleeping patterns (49). He explains the lurking violence in lines 8-11 with the woman's too early pregnancy that came as a shock for her as she was "unready to give up romance for maternity" (50). He sees the couple's growing apart as a consequence of this. According to Gonzalez, the last line of the poem can be read in two ways. A positive interpretation would be that these two people are opposites but they complete one another perfectly. The other possibility is that if the husband were gone, the woman would gladly claim his place in their life as well and would not miss him – thus she would not need him any more (49-51).

A very different interpretation of the poem is also possible, however. Firstly, neither of Gonzalez's conclusions take into account the several of allusions to acting and pretence. Secondly, the poem does not contain references to childbearing or pregnancy. The only image that might have a remote connection to fertility is 'bud', but in this case, it is 'tightened', the flower has not even blossomed yet, let alone bore fruit. It is possible that rather than depicting

the current state of the marriage, the poem tells the story from the woman's point of view addressing but never directly speaking to her husband.

The phrases "favoured only child" and "my tightened bud" indicate that the female speaker was very young or naïve when the marriage had taken place. The lines "calmed by sagas of how we lay like spoons / in a drawer" may refer to her hopes for her imagined future as a married woman. The word 'spoons' would then refer to harmony, a dream of domestic happiness. 'Sagas' recall ideas of Hollywood and romantic love stories in which she might have believed. There is a sudden change in tone in the line "till you blew open my tightened bud." This can suggest that she was literally a virgin when they got married, but the mention of Columbus also conjures up images of the Virgin Land, America being invaded. Gonzalez mentions that "marital rape is one possibility" (50), but quite an extreme one. Another interpretation could be that after her 'favored' girlhood, marriage brought a severe disappointment for the woman and her husband did not treat her at all in the way she had expected. In this sense, the violent images refer to the way the woman's girlhood dreams were destroyed and she became disillusioned with her earlier romantic notions of marriage and with the person of her husband. The contrast between her earlier hopes and her married reality is represented by the interesting visual contrast between the much more ragged "saw-toothed waves, the rows of letter *m*s" and the smooth curves of the spoons four lines earlier.

Lines 8-11 convey without doubt that the husband had taken control of his young wife and of their marriage. Perhaps he had seemed the perfect man, the perfect husband-to-be with his "intellectual cradling of the head" and "creaseless envelope of clothes" and it was only after they were married that she found this was only a mask. The marriage is now characterized by pretence and a lack of true communication, and the wife suffers from being forced into an inferior position. In the poem, she looks back at her past naivety with irony. A

mixture of anger, disappointment and perhaps even contempt can be detected in her tone as she talks about her husband.

However, she is not as powerless any more as she was in the first phase of their marriage described in the middle of the poem. The fact that she can be judgemental about her husband shows a possibility of change in *power relations*. In the last six lines, the wife watches her husband in his disturbed sleep. His position is described with the word 'skew' which can also mean distort or falsify. His mask is removed, the 'stubborn adverbs' do not obey him, he is failing in his role and his nervous movements betray his anxiety. It seems that, while recalling the different phases of their relationship, the wife finally sees him as he really is. She imagines that her husband's anxiety is caused by some subconscious knowledge that soon she might regain power over her own life. In other words, as she sees his weakness and vulnerability and she also seems to realize the possibility of her own empowerment.

Yet the poem also indicates that this possibility is a remote one. The wife's monologue takes place in the realm of the night in the narrow space of the bedroom. It is worth pointing out that the word 'shunting' in the second line may mean moving in a secretive way from one place to another, but it can also refer to trains changing tracks. Shunting thus carries both a sense of hiding and of changing direction which is very appropriate in this setting. The word sleep in the second line and the word dreams in the last stanza frame the poem. In the present, the wife is unable to speak her thoughts during the day and she can only dream of change. But the poem is not without hope: there is a possibility of waking up so that a new phase of the marriage could begin.

"FROM THE DRESSING-ROOM"

"From the Dressing-Room" appeared in Medbh McGuckian's second collection *Venus and the Rain* (1984). Leontia Flynn writes of this collection that it is "an enquiry into 'the female' on a universal, indeed cosmic scale" and that "the poems now frequently teeter on the verge of making very *large* claims about gender distinctions" (40-41). Indeed, "From the Dressing-Room" is a poem in which questions around female identity and independence are foregrounded heavily. The poem conveys a woman's thoughts, who feels that her independence is threatened. The setting of the poem is the speaker's own small apartment of which she is very proud. In his essay, Charles O'Neill provides an analysis of the symbolism of house and room in Medbh McGuckian's first five collections. He claims that "[h]ouses might, in fact, be seen as her central metaphor":

> McGuckian's use of the "house" as an image of both physical and psychic states embodies a constantly shifting constellation of values: it is a refuge and a prison, a place of parturition and poetic activity, a space to be defended and one to be left vulnerable. (66)

It seems that nearly all of the above are true of the apartment in the poem. This means that the *house* offers not only a setting but also a frame of interpretation.

"From the Dressing-Room," similarly to "The Hollywood Bed," depicts a male-female relationship, once again from the woman's point of view. "My poet's attic" suggests the speaker is a poet, but the phrase itself can be read as an allusion to another work of literature. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf claims that this is exactly what a woman needs if she is to become a writer. In this context the 'poet's attic' or the 'room of one's own' means much more than the space itself; it becomes a metaphor for a woman's independence and artistic freedom. The speaker of the poem claims that this is something she has "passionately sought." The 'dressing-room', which gave the poem its title and which appears once more in

the second stanza, is an interesting image. It seems to be the innermost part, the heart of the apartment. The dressing-room is a term almost exclusively connected to women and femininity. The speaker of the poem is very conscious of the importance of this apartment in her life and thus it becomes a part of who she is, a container for her identity. In this interpretation, the dressing-room becomes the essence of her womanhood. Referring back to Charles O'Neill's statement, the apartment is a refuge for the speaker, where she can freely be herself, a place of poetic activity, but it is also connected to her body and her identity as a woman.

It is easy to imagine that she would choose carefully whom she admits into this private space of hers. The speaker has controversial feelings about their relationship with her partner. At the very beginning of the poem the lines "nature / siding then with the enemy that / delicately mixes up genders" immediately calls to mind the concept of the battle of sexes. The reference at the beginning of the second stanza ("his writing is for me") suggests that he also is a poet or writer, in which case there may be some kind of professional rivalry between them. The use of *colours* is notable in the poem: he is a "blue lizard", while she wears "flesh-coloured silk"; resembling the traditional use of pink for girl babies and blue for boys, an evocative image of gender distinction. It seems that these controversies lead the speaker to consider ending the relationship. She imagines writing "a very last and sunsetty letter of farewell" in a "jolly, wifely tone." Her warning "to be careful to procure his own lodgings" and the emphasis that her "good little room is lockable" reveal that she wishes to exclude him from her intimate space, from her life.

The turning point in the poem comes suddenly: "my good little room is lockable, / but shivery," made even more surprising by the contrast with the apparent sarcasm in the few preceding lines. 'Shivery' is a truly excellent word choice from Medbh McGuckian, because it expresses so much: the coldness creates a contrast with the sunny garden in the first stanza;

the word conveys both fear and loneliness; and, combined with the word ‘lockable’, it turns the room of shelter and refuge into a prison cell as noted in O’Neill’s essay (66). ‘Shivery’ is also the last, and possibly most important sign of the speaker’s deep insecurity. There are earlier signs of this in the poem, like her attempt to reassure herself in her partner’s absence in the first lines of the second stanza, or her ‘springless’ walk later. It is clear that behind the walls of her self-confidence there is fear and uncertainty.

The question is what she would feel threatened by. The obvious answer could be her partner; but this, despite her apparently controversial emotions, does not seem likely. In the first stanza, the speaker says she has ‘brightened’ her room – that is, herself, her inner being – before her partner came, which indicates that he is truly important to her. The second half of the first stanza shows a joyful, happy relationship complete with an imagery of nature and summer (lizard, garden). The lines “[f]or I like / his ways, he’s light on his feet and does / not break anything,” describe how this man moves about the house, but they also carry a deeper meaning about the relationship. His careful movements show that he respects the vulnerability of her private space and her independence; consequently, he is no intruder. The closing lines of the two stanzas run parallel and frame the poem in a reassuring tone: “[he] puts his entire soul / into bringing me a glass of water” — “I recover at the mere / sight of him propping up my pillow.” If he can “put his entire soul” into a relatively neutral gesture like bringing a glass of water, how much more apparent would his love and care be an intimate action like propping up someone’s pillow. In addition, the pillow can be metonymic to the bed which, as in “The Hollywood Bed,” is a central image for a couple’s relationship. All in all, these details depict a happy and stable relationship; consequently, the man cannot be to one the speaker of the poem feels threatened by.

At this point, one must return to the first two lines of the poem which are unusual and perplexing, even in Medbh McGuckian’s poetry. “Left to itself, they say, every foetus / would

turn female" sounds like some pseudo-scientific fact, but as the starting point of the whole line of thoughts it has a special significance to the whole of the poem. Based on the explicit reference in the first line, it might be that the speaker herself is pregnant even though there is no other clear reference to this. This would cast a different light on the whole of the poem. The *house* in not only a traditional trope for the mind, but in can also be read as a metaphor for the body as it happens in other poems of Medbh McGuckian, for example "The Flitting" or later "The Sun-Moon Child." The apartment then is not only her 'poet's attic' or a shelter for her identity, but also an extension of her body. In this context the dressing-room, the innermost space tightly connected to womanhood, can be read as a metaphor for the womb; while the "length of flesh-coloured silk" covering her body is reminiscent of the way her body surrounds her child. The phrase in the second line 'staving in' is quite a violent one. It means to crush or break into, suggesting that she perceives her unborn child as an intruder who disrupts the unity of her body. The speaker sees the baby as a threat not only to her body, but also to her independence, as the arrival of a child would completely change the way of life she has built up for herself. Her responsibilities as a mother could also hinder her artistic freedom. Her controversial feelings are not caused by the relationship itself, but she projects her doubts regarding the pregnancy onto the relationship with her partner. In conclusion, the woman's defensive behaviour towards her apartment is a reflection of her fears as to what her pregnancy would mean for her future life, her identity, and her independence.

"A CONVERSATION SET TO FLOWERS"

Medbh McGuckian's third collection, *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988) is quite different from *Venus and the Rain*. Although it retains the defining characteristics of her earlier work; the imagery, the style and the main topics have all gone through changes. Leontia Flynn writes that the poems here feel "stripped down and bleached out, often repeating a vocabulary of 'sea', 'sky', 'blue', 'white', 'snow', 'water' and 'weather' almost refined to abstraction" (65). This description is very true of the poem "A Conversation Set to Flowers," which is filled with references to white, icy winter. Simple concepts, like seasons and colours, form the basis of the imagery in the poem. This vivid imagery serves to depict and represent the female speaker's frame of mind, her emotional inner world during what will prove to be a period of transition in her life.

It is no surprise to encounter a female speaker once again in this poem who is addressing her husband. Unlike in the previous two poems, though, there is a shift in focus. While the relationship between man and woman was a central element in both "The Hollywood Bed" and "From the Dressing-Room," in "A Conversation Set to Flowers" the husband appears to be a background figure. His emotional presence is crucial, nonetheless; it is something reassuring and comforting for the speaker. "The dress of ecru lace you bought me […] is still all heart" sounds like a reminder of their wedding as the colour ecru, a shade of yellowish white, is often used for wedding dresses. This shows that their relationship has remained strong, even through hard times. As to what these hard times might have been, the first two lines seem surprisingly straightforward: "That fine china we conceived in spring / and lost in summer" refers most probably to a lost child, a miscarriage. The fact that she is "still bending over prams" and that she dreams of giving birth imply that she has not yet recovered from the trauma of losing her baby. The poem focuses on the consequences of these events and on the woman's process of recovery. The 'stripped down' imagery subtly and

beautifully conveys the speaker's conflicted emotional state, her grief and her hopes for the future.

Medbh McGuckian characteristically uses ancient, common tropes in her poetry but she always fills them with new meanings, transforming them into complex symbols from mere metaphors, as she has done, for example, with *house* in "From the Dressing-Room." Two of the tropes she uses here are winter and whiteness, interrelated but independent in the poem. Winter is most commonly associated with death or the lack of fertility in literature. The mentions of 'snow', 'ice' and 'white forest' recall not only feelings of cold and loneliness, but also of peace and calm. Winter thus becomes a very apt depiction of the interim period in the speaker's life. The loss of her child left her feeling cold, pained and sad. But at the same time the quiet, empty calm of winter may just be the solace she needs as she turns inwards and retreats from the world outside to deal with her pain. Whiteness appears not only in the sharp cold of 'ice-blue peaks' and the calm of 'white forest', but also in images unrelated to winter. In the first line, 'fine china'– something valuable but very easily broken – is a beautiful metaphor for a foetus. The whiteness emphasizes the vulnerability and the innocence of the unborn baby. The white dress, as mentioned above, refers to wedding, love and marriage. In the fourth stanza, white becomes the lack of colour in contrast to a "multi-coloured sunrise" like the bright colours of spring after the white of winter. "Colour," Peggy O'Brian writes, "is one of McGuckian's favourite languages. She's explored its connotations deeply and is enthusiastic and lavish with its use" (244). Similarly, Patricia Haberstroh notes that the poet "gives colors as many meanings as she creates contexts for them" (143). The multiple meanings of one simple colour in this one poem are a perfect example.

Among the varied shades of white, Medbh McGuckian suddenly adds some bright red, creating a surprising visual effect, like a painting of the female speaker's emotional landscape. The colour red is brought into the poem in the third stanza through the apples the speaker's

and her husband's bodies turn into in her dream. Leontia Flynn points out that 'dream' and 'sleep' are one of the most frequent words in the collection. Old traditions interpret them as prophecies for the future; modern psychology uses them as clues to a person's subconscious. In the case of this highly symbolic dream, both approaches seem appropriate. The apple, a fertility symbol deriving from ancient mythologies, suggests the possible conception of a future child or the speaker's wish for this to happen. On the other hand, the colour itself also has its own meanings. Red traditionally stands for love, passion and fertility. Considering the visual effect, though, red on white is not free from connotations of blood and pain in the context of the "terrible attacks" of giving birth in the first half of the stanza. This is a beautiful example once again, of Medbh McGuckian's use of colour as she unites two seemingly contradictory meanings. Both red and white have positive and negative connotations in the poem and together they depict the mixed feelings of the speaker. While her grief, her sense of loss is not yet gone, she dreams of the conception of her future child. This emotional state is reflected again in the way the two dreams seem to balance one another out, just as joy and pain are both present at the birth of a child. This seems to imply that there was pain earlier, but future happiness awaits.

This implication is repeated and developed further in the last stanza, which is full of images that suggest a new beginning. "The grey north door and the short day" depict the dull colourless emptiness of the winter, but the door of winter surely opens on the coming spring. The phrase "what the snow said" in the first line of the last stanza rings very familiar. It is probably no coincidence that it echoes the title of the last section in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said." The allusion is clearly in line with the theme of fertility and infertility. T. S. Eliot uses a large number of various intertextual references in his poem. Perhaps the most relevant here is the book of Jeremiah. Chapter 17 compares the man who turns away from God to "a bush in the wastelands" in contrast to "the man who trusts in the

Lord," who will be "like a tree planted by the water" that "never fails to bear fruit" (verses 6-8). Elsewhere in Jeremiah, God withholds the rain as a punishment for the people's unfaithfulness and sinful behaviour (Jer 3:3). The sound of thunder in *The Waste Land* represents the hope of the coming rain after the long drought, which will make the land fertile again and bring renewal. The snow of winter in Medbh McGuckian's poem, another weather phenomenon, also 'says' that spring will certainly come and bring rebirth or possibly new birth in this case. The "multi-coloured sunrise" is of course the beginning of a new day or alternatively a new period in life after this 'waste land' of winter.

After this repeated imagery of a new beginning, the last two lines round up the poem beautifully. The concept of a new page in a book adds yet another meaning to the colour white, but also reaches back to the first stanza where the same book appears creating a frame to the poem. The first three lines read: "That fine china we conceived in spring / and lost in summer has blown the final crumbs / out of the book I was reading"; while in the last two lines "a hill-wind blows at the book's edges / to open a page." The book in the poem inevitably recalls the idea of the biblical book of life as it appears in Psalm 139:13, 16:

> For you created my inmost being;
>
> you knit me together in my mother's womb. […]
>
> Your eyes saw my unformed body;
>
> all the days ordained for me were written in your book
>
> before one of them came to be.

The life of the unborn child was, it seems, erased from the book in the first stanza, leaving empty whiteness, like that of winter, behind. Yet, the book opens to a new page in the last stanza. This turning of the page may also refer to a new period in the speaker's life. The white of the new page here is no longer an emptiness but a possibility, a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate on which a new life can be written, both for the speaker and her hoped for future child.

"THE SUN-MOON CHILD"

The poem entitled "The Sun-Moon Child" is from Medbh McGuckian's fourth collection, *Marconi's Cottage* (1991). The collection is certainly the most renowned and acclaimed of her first four volumes of poetry and several critics, among them Clair Wills, note that it conveys a sense of truly inspired poetry (185). *Marconi's Cottage* also has a biographical significance. Firstly, the cottage itself is a small summer house bought by Medbh McGuckian near Ballycastle in County Antrim (Flynn, 95). Incidentally, it was in the same building that Guglielmo Marconi experimented with radio waves nearly a century earlier. Secondly, the collection is closely connected to the birth of Medbh McGuckian's fourth and last child, her much awaited daughter. Patricia Haberstroh writes of the collection:

> *Marconi's Cottage*, like McGuckian's other volumes, is full of multiple voices, highlighting the tension arising from a woman's double role as mother and poet: the desire, on the one hand, to have another child, and, on the other, to commit herself fully to her writing. As is typical of McGuckian, these two roles intersect; the yet unconceived child dreamed about in the first part of the volume becomes the child celebrated in the later poems. Parallels between this child and the unwritten and written poem are developed throughout the volume. (150)

"The Sun-Moon Child" fits in beautifully with the themes Patricia Haberstroh emphasizes. The poem is from the first part of the collection and the poet writes about a dreamed-of child, as well as about the problem of artistic inspiration.

As for the style, several reviewers, for example Stephen Yenser (229) and Molly Bendall (367) emphasize the fluid, ever-moving effect Medbh McGuckian's poetry creates, which is especially characteristic of *Marconi's Cottage* and "The Sun-Moon Child." Although

the poems are perhaps even more difficult to read and understand than the ones from earlier collections, they also seem to synthetize the many images typical of Medbh McGuckian's poetry in new ways. "The Sun-Moon Child" begins with the sentence "I dreamt I could make from the summer / a winter childbirth, by turning the slats / of a window to darken a room in Italy." *Houses* (rooms), *seasons*, *childbirth* and *dreams* are concepts that are all at the core of Medbh McGuckian's poetry. All of them appear in earlier poems, but never so united. It is the constant interaction between these central concepts that creates the poem. Yet "The Sun-Moon Child" differs from the works analysed in the thesis earlier in several aspects. One of these features is that here the 'you' is absent; "The Sun-Moon Child" has no addressee, the female speaker is alone. The *dream*, which in earlier poems signalled the threshold of speaker's subconscious, is closer to a nightmare here, featuring wars, Satan and death. The *house* that was a refuge, a protective shell in "From the Dressing-Room" is now "impossibly fragile." Whereas the coming of spring after winter was a certainty in "A Conversation Set to Flowers," even *seasons* seem false in "The Sun-Moon Child." Everything in the poem seems to become uncertain and unstable.

Another unusual feature in "The Sun-Moon Child" is that it contains a surprising number of references to time, for example "the third and fifteenth of every month" or "his seven-minute flame," in contrast to Medbh McGuckian's other, usually almost timeless, poems. On a second glance however, even time appears to have been turned upside down for the speaker:

> …and the third
> and fifteenth of every month were our first meeting,
> our first night. Sleep hammered out the days
> within the bounds of an hour; I accepted the dream's
> standpoint and decision, like a false season.

The mixing of plural and singular, the false season and the fact, that it is *sleep* that defines time here, signals that even time, which normally is an ultimate and unchangeable reality, has become uncertain in the poem. After the house has become "impossibly fragile," now even time has lost its regular rhythm: everything that should be stable and solid started falling apart around the speaker; nothing is certain in her life any more.

The past is foregrounded in the poem by other means as well: through the reference to World War One and through the presence of dead people in the poem. All the countries mentioned (Italy, France and Austria) participated in the First World War, which certainly was a time when people in Europe felt that the world was falling apart around them. The colour of the speaker's dress is also "gun-metal grey," which is also conjures up notions of war and adds to the sense of danger which looms over the poem. From the third stanza onwards, the poem seems curiously populated with various ghost-like figures, who come back from the dead to haunt the speaker. They constitute the "multiple voices" mentioned by Patricia Haberstroh (150) as they all affect the speaker, some in negative, some in more positive ways.

The first of these ghostly figures is the 'he' in the third stanza, who is described as "an Adam / of the young dead of World War One." This carries a sense of innocence and uncorruptedness as Adam is the newly created man in the Garden of Eden and the expression "young dead" suggests innocent victims of the war. The next line, however, takes a shocking turn by calling this 'he' "Satan, […] who cursed by name the moon and its perfume." The moon, a metaphor often used by Medbh McGuckian, is an ancient trope for femininity. Thus the act of cursing the moon means cursing womanhood itself. The dichotomy between the innocence of Adam and Satan may also recall the notion of man's ancient struggle against evil. It is certain that the 'he' here cannot be a human being, let alone a lover or partner of the speaker. Rather, he is like a mythological demon, who brings misfortune upon her.

Another of these voices, who are heard from the world of the dead, is that of John Keats, who is explicitly mentioned in the last stanza, but the allusion to him might be more significant, than it would seem at first. Though Medbh McGuckian is well known for using an almost countless number of allusions to other poets, it is unusual even for her to dedicate several consecutive lines to one of them, but this is exactly what she has done in this poem.[1] The first half of the fourth stanza is a detailed description of Keats's death. Keats died of tuberculosis in Rome, in an apartment near the Spanish Steps. People with tuberculosis often cough blood, which is depicted in the poem as "cherry-spotted bed." Yet there is another surprising allusion to Keats to be found in the poem: in the title. One of Keats's major works was a poem entitled *Hyperion* (1820). Hyperion, in ancient Greek and Roman mythology was one of the titans, who had four children, among them Helios, the sun, and Selena, the moon. Therefore the 'sun-moon child' can be regarded as a reference to Hyperion's children. In a conversation with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian revealed that Keats was a major inspiration, a sort of male mentor for her at the beginning of her poetic career (O'Connor, 21). Therefore it is possible to read the reference to Keats's death as a metaphor for the loss of poetic inspiration.

The last of these ghostly voices is that of the "name grandmother" in the last line. In the interview mentioned above, Medbh McGuckian also revealed that her grandmother, her father's mother, "wrote poetry, but nobody has never found any of it" (O'Connor, 20). The grandmother as a fellow poet is certainly a benevolent ghost, but her presence may be

[1] Shane Alcobia-Murphy claims that much of Medbh McGuckian's poetry is made up of "meticulously arranged intertexts," phrases and quotations taken from various other authors (124). The source texts Alcobia-Murphy detected are not marked in any way in the poems. There are, however, several other examples of explicit references to other poets or artists in Medbh McGuckian's poetry. The title of the poem "Most Emily of All" (*Marconi's Cottage*, 1991) refers to Emily Dickinson, but in the third stanza, the name of Lermentov (sic) is mentioned. The person in question is Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov, a Russian Romantic poet. Other references include ones to Rainer Maria Rilke in the poem "Visiting Rainer Maria" (*Marconi's Cottage,* 1991), which is analysed by Leontia Flynn (98-105); and Paula Modersohn-Becker, who was not a poet but a painter, in the poem "To Call Paula Paul" (*Marconi's Cottage,* 1991).

significant in another way as well. Leontia Flynn points out that, occasioned by the birth of the poet's daughter, female predecessors and distaff relations play an important role in *Marconi's Cottage.* Thus the "name grandmother" is a predecessor not only in the literal, but also in the artistic sense.

The narrative of the poem follows two threads, the ones that also Patricia Haberstroh emphasizes, namely childbearing and creating poetry. The speaker of the poem experiences a difficult period in her life in which everything seems to fall apart around her and she has lost all footholds. She has been longing for and dreaming of a child she cannot have: the curse of the moon and the 'cherry-spotted' blanket may refer to menstrual blood, here a painful reminder that the speaker is not pregnant. Keats's death, the loss of inspiration signals the inability to write poetry, in other words, artistic infertility. The notions of child and poetry are inseparably intertwined in the poem. If the poem *Hyperion* is Keats's child, then the "sun-moon child" is Keats's grandchild. The "sun-moon child" is not yet born, neither as a poem, nor as a human child. Yet, there is some hope to be found in the last lines. When the poetic grandfather, Keats, is dead, a female predecessor, the grandmother, may take his place. This implies a turn away from the male principle that has become uncertain and later even destructive in the life of the speaker, towards the female principle. Not only is the possibility of a new kind of inspiration suggested in the last stanza of the poem, but the presence of the word 'birthday' may also imply a hope for giving birth to a new child.

Such a reading helps to reconsider Peggy O'Brian's interpretation, which has been generally accepted so far, that the poem describes a love affair. In her essay, she gave a short analysis based mainly on the first stanza of the poem. Here, she writes "the gap in the wall where the bed hides is like a gap in a respectable life where an affair takes place." According to her, the loose stich is "always a sign of loose morals," the floating of the room is an image of sexual ecstasy and the fragility of the house and of the glass it is made of "indicates

anticipatory grief, the leaden certainty of sure loss," in which the affair must result (247). Yet there are several details in the poem Peggy O'Brian's interpretation does not take into account. Although she emphasizes the sense of uncertainty and fear that permeates the poem, the narrative she suggests does not fit the whole of "The Sun-Moon Child." Peggy O'Brian does not consider the dreamed-of child at the beginning of the poem, nor the infinitely disturbing description of the male persona in the third stanza, who should be the lover in her reading. Even the phrase, which is central to Peggy O'Brian's interpretation, may be read differently. Although it is no question that the bed is a metaphor for a male-female relationship, "the bed was let into a recess" could also mean that the speaker's marriage was pushed into the background, it lost its importance in her life for a time and it can no longer offer the support it did, for example, in "A Conversation Set to Flowers." In conclusion, though Peggy O'Brian offers some valuable observations about Medbh McGuckian "illogical logic" as it is displayed in "The Sun-Moon Child" and about the poet's "gift for representing complex, often contradictory states of mind" (246), her narrative interpretation of the poem does not stand when "The Sun-Moon Child" is analysed in detail, as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In my thesis, I have completed close readings of four poems by uncovering the hidden narratives in them. I have found "The Hollywood Bed" to be a story of an unhappy marriage in which the wife is forced into an inferior position. Following this narrative thread has allowed me to question certain points in Alexander Gonzalez's previous reading. Although he has also highlighted the *power relations* in the marriage, he inferred that the reason for the wife's unhappiness and the couple's growing apart was her early pregnancy, for which she was not yet ready. In contrast, I have emphasized the lack of true communication between husband and wife and the presence of dishonesty and pretence in the relationship based on the imagery related to paper and writing and to film and acting in the poem. In the analysis of "From the Dressing-Room," I have applied Charles O'Neill's discussion on the symbol of the *house* to this particular poem. This has helped me to find a satisfactory interpretation behind the seemingly contradictory clues, namely that the female speaker projects her fears relating to her pregnancy onto her otherwise harmonious relationship. In the close reading of "A Conversation Set to Flowers," I have used the symbolism of *colours*, which Peggy O'Brian also stresses in her essay, and the symbolism of *dreams*, an idea mentioned by Leontia Flynn, to uncover the narrative of the poem. I have found that "A Conversation Set to Flowers" depicts the complex state of mind of a woman who is recovering from the loss of her baby but also hopes that soon a new child would be born to her. I have taken Patricia Haberstroh's idea about the parallel between the creation of a poem and bearing a child as a starting point for my interpretation of "The Sun-Moon Child." I have inferred that the poem conveys the deep insecurity of a woman who has lost her artistic inspiration and the pain she feels over her unfulfilled desire to have another child.

In spite of the gradual shift in focus from the male-female relationship to a woman's feelings about maternity, the way the narrative is woven into the poem is very similar in all of these poems. The key events – for example the marriage in the case of "The Hollywood Bed" or the miscarriage in "A Conversation Set to Flowers" – have already taken place at the time of the poems, that is, the poems do not simply report the events themselves. Instead, they tell the emotional consequences of the event and include implications of possible future resolutions. As the poet herself said in an interview: "I just wanted to get the experience, or the meaning of the experience, not the experience itself, because the experience itself was nothing" (Seiler, 84). Instead of simply telling what had happened, Medbh McGuckian's poems describe the complex and often ambiguous emotional experience triggered by particular events in a woman's life.

It seems that McGuckian is able to represent such private experiences through evoking the subconscious. Many of her poems take place in the realm of *sleep* and *dreams*, on the verge of the subconscious. Thus, they are able to allow the reader a glimpse into an inner world, the emotional background of real life events. If this is true, it can raise a number of questions. Clair Wills argues that "[t]he poems offer not representations of the truth of feminine experience, but a private language whose rationale is in part the maintenance of secrecy" (191). Could it be that Medbh McGuckian's famously obscure and enigmatic style is closely connected to the presence of the subconscious and the emotional complexity in her poems? Could then her much criticised privacy and secrecy paradoxically be what enables her to represent certain truths of female experience? The line of questions could be continued, but only much further research could attempt to find answers to them. Yet, the number of questions raised also proves that the narratives in Medbh McGuckian's poetry are much more complex and significant than they would seem at first and that the issues related to them may have implications for our understanding of the whole of her *oeuvre*.

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Appendix A

The Hollywood Bed

We narrow into the house, the room, the bed,
where sleep begins its shunting. You adopt
your mask, your intellectual cradling of the head,
neat as a notepaper in your creaseless
envelope of clothes, while I lie crosswise,
imperial as a favoured only child,
calmed by sagas of how we lay like spoons
in a drawer, till you blew open
my tightened bud, my fully-buttoned housecoat,
like some Columbus mastering
the saw-toothed waves, the rows of letter *m*s.

Now the headboard is disturbed
by your uncomfortable skew, your hands
like stubborn adverbs visiting your face,
or your shoulder, in your piquancy of dreams,
the outline that, if you were gone,
would find me in your place.

Appendix B

From the Dressing-Room

Left to itself, they say, every foetus
would turn female, staving in, nature
siding with the enemy that
delicately mixes up genders. This
is an absence I have passionately sought,
brightening nevertheless my poet's attic
with my steady hands, calling him my blue
lizard till his moans might be heard
at the far end of the garden. For I like
his ways, he's light on his feet and does
not break anything, puts his entire soul
into bringing me a glass of water.

I can take anything now, even his being
away, for it always seems to me his
writing is for me, as I walk springless
from the dressing-room in a sisterly
length of flesh-coloured silk. Oh there
are moments when you think you can
give notice in a jolly, wifely tone,
tossing off a very last and sunsetty
letter of farewell, with strict injunctions
to be careful to procure his own lodgings:
that my good little room is lockable,
but shivery, I recover at the mere
sight of him propping up my pillow.

Appendix C

A Conversation Set to Flowers

That fine china we conceived in spring
and lost in summer has blown the final crumbs
out of the book I was reading; though one
is still bending over prams, an ice-blue peak
over the frills of houses.

The dress of ecru lace you bought me
at the February sales is still at heart.
I cup my hands, thin as a window-pane
unevenly blown, as if to hold
some liquid in my palm, and the rings
slide up and down.

In my birth-dreams light falls in pleats
or steps, the room after those terrible attacks
is a white forest, scented with sea,
and we both change into apples, my breasts
and knees into apples, though you
are more apple than they could possibly be.

But what the snow said, long ago,
to the grey north door and the short day,
breaks through like the multi-coloured
sunrise round a stamp on a letter.
A hill-wind blows at the book's edges
to open a page.

Appendix D

The Sun-Moon Child

I dreamt I could make from the summer
a winter childbirth, by turning the slats
of a window to darken a room in Italy.
The house was impossibly fragile, made
of cloth and glass, the room floated freely
within itself, and the bed was let into
a recess, like a stitch that is slack and loose.

My dress was gun-metal grey, with a blow-away
hem: I had saved up my money in an old,
shoulder-length evening glove, and the third
and fifteenth of every month were our first meeting,
our first night. Sleep hammered out the days
within the bounds of an hour; I accepted the dream's
standpoint and decision, like a false season.

His skin and hair and eyes were cloaked
in the warm tones of the day, so he was an Adam
of the young dead of World War One,
or Satan, in the shape of a star-jessamine,
who cursed by name the moon and its perfume.
The clouds had space to travel the grey
background of his seven-minute flame,

until the cherry-spotted bed to the right
of the Spanish Steps became
a blanket of chance-gathered roses
for Keats's first night in the grave.
When I thought out my dream, it was some days
old, a cluster of half-rooms with Austrian blinds,
and no France; it was the hundredth birthday
of my name grandmother.