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## “The World is still Beautiful”: An Eco-philosophical Reading of Eugene McCabe’s *Victims* Trilogy

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on Irish writer, playwright and television screenwriter Eugene McCabe’s fictional representation of the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ in his trilogy *Victims*, published in the collection *Heaven Lies about Us* (2005). Living most of his life on his family farm on the Monaghan/Fermanagh border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, McCabe had a deep understanding of the historically entrenched hatreds, bigotry and fundamentalisms of its inhabitants, and his fiction reflects the human tragedy underlying the violence. This paper draws on an eco-philosophical framework to suggest that by capturing the entanglement between the natural and cultural place-world McCabe’s poetics offers, from a liberal humanist perspective, an indictment of anthropocentric patriarchy at the root of violent dispute. McCabe’s literary world, evoking natural and cultural landscapes, encapsulates the absurdity of isolating territories via false political borders, marginalizing the value of bioregion and diversity and ignoring the vital oneness of humanity. Thus, though McCabe’s short stories are indeed culturally and politically specific, in shedding light on the self-destructiveness of human behaviour they are ultimately timeless and universal.

**Key Words.** Eugene McCabe; *Victims* Trilogy; The Troubles; Eco-philosophy; Place

**Resumen.** Este artículo se centra en la representación literaria del ‘Conflicto’ norirlandés en la trilogía *Victims* del escritor, dramaturgo y guionista de televisión irlandés Eugene McCabe. Al haber pasado la mayor parte de su vida en la granja familiar situada en la frontera de Monaghan y Fermanagh, entre Irlanda del Norte e Irlanda, McCabe conocía a fondo los odios, el fanatismo y los fundamentalismos arraigados en la historia de sus gentes, y su ficción refleja la tragedia humana que hay detrás de la violencia. Este artículo se fundamenta en un enfoque eco-filosófico para sugerir que la poética de McCabe, al retratar el conflicto entre el entorno natural y el cultural, presenta una crítica del patriarcado antropocéntrico que subyace esta violenta disputa desde una perspectiva liberal y humanista. El universo literario de McCabe, que evoca paisajes naturales y culturales, sintetiza el sentido absurdo de separar los territorios mediante falsas fronteras políticas, marginalizando el valor de la biodiversidad y de la bio-región a la vez que ignorando la unión vital de la humanidad. Por lo tanto, aunque los relatos

de McCabe son específicos desde una perspectiva cultural y política, al resaltar la capacidad de destrucción del ser humano, resultan atemporales y universales.

**Palabras clave.** Eugene McCabe; *Victims* Trilogy; el conflicto irlandés; eco-filosofía; lugar

Colm Tóibín rightly proclaims Eugene McCabe (1930-2020) one of those Irish writers “that are least known who should be better known” (cited in Fernández-Sánchez 2009: n.d.). Indeed, despite a considerable body of work, he has unduly received little scholarly attention. Those who have addressed his work, however, have primarily done so through a political and historical lens, focusing on his portrayal of the Troubles. Certainly, his stories are more easily understood by reading them in the context of the history of the region. Without entirely abandoning historical and political concerns, however, this paper centres on McCabe’s poetics of place, here understood as a place-world (Casey 2009), unifying people, their culture and natural environment. The significance of nature in his work has not gone entirely unnoticed. Fintan O’Toole suggests it embodies violence that lies “beyond human intervention” (O’Toole 2018: n.d.), and Laura Pelaschiar notes that nature is portrayed as “hostile even when it’s beautiful” (Pelaschiar 1996: 158). Yet critics have barely fixated on its narrative role. The main aim of this paper, then, is to expose the centrality of the place-world to McCabe’s short stories, ‘Cancer’, ‘Heritage’ and ‘Siege’/ ‘Victims’, published together in the collection *Christ in the Fields* (1993) and later in *Heaven Lies About Us* (2005). In his ecocritical reading of Irish literature, Eóin Flannery argues that space in Irish literature is more than a mere background to politics or culture, and that ecocriticism can be a useful framework of analysis (Flannery 2015: introduction). Similarly, I suggest the place-world as more than a backdrop to the Troubles in these tales. Instead, it plays a pivotal role in conveying the self-destructiveness of human conflict. Furthermore, I support Elmer Kennedy Andrew’s observation in hailing ‘Victims’ as the “quintessential liberal humanist novel” (Kennedy-Andrews 2003: 67). And, thus, by reading it through an ecosophical approach, I wish to reveal how it voices this perspective, thereby extending the topographical boundaries of these tales from local into universal.

Characterized as a writer that “retains the air of being from somewhere else, an outsider alert to the nuances of place” (*The Irish Times* 1998), McCabe was certainly deeply knowledgeable of his territory and its inhabitants’ customs, attitudes, behaviours, ideologies, memory, and history — understandably, given that for most of his life he lived and worked on his farm in County Monahan just a few meters from the Fermanagh border. In his introduction to McCabe’s novel *Death and Nightingales*, Tóibín describes this place as one that remains “unyielding, unforgiving, filled with silence and regrets, old grudges and sharp hatreds” (2018: ix). McCabe’s sparse social realism, full of myths and dark evocation of historical resonance, masterfully captures Tóibín’s description of these borderlands. He portrays its inhabitants as unyielding and unforgiving in their inability to free themselves from dogmatic ideologies, and their blood ties to history. Embedded in deep regional culture, portrayed with local accents and idiosyncrasies, his characterization skilfully reveals how old grudges and violence resonate through this community. Furthermore, his fiction vividly captures a visceral sense of nature and the way the landscape changes with the passing of time and the seasons. At McCabe’s funeral in 2020, Monsignor Richard Mohan fittingly stated that “[McCabe’s] love of literature, or writing, was matched only by his love of nature” (cited in Power, n.d.), and his work certainly remains a testimony.

McCabe’s work should not only be seen as a dramatization of the turbulent history of colonialism, land ownership, religious fundamentalism, and a precarious peace in his native

region, nor interpreted as “unashamed localism” (Ó Ciardha 2016: 77). As Tóibín points out, “McCabe is too interested in the yearning spirit to allow his work to be read merely as a dramatization of the dark politics or traces of history of his own country” (Tóibín, 2018: vi). Instead, it should be appreciated through the complex cultural dynamics of the region and the timelessness of human experience. As Laura Pelaschiar notes:

McCabe’s ability to universalize from the immediate particular is a rare gift: writing about the troubled province of Northern Ireland, he is never provincial. He manages to make old troubles new and surprising, and forces the reader to realize that the “blind bitter fields” of Northern Ireland are, in the end, a metaphor for the world and for the human condition. (1996:170)

Furthermore, Fintan O’ Toole has noted an “intense sense of place” in these stories (O’Toole: 2018: n.d.). The present paper explores the relationship between this ‘yearning spirit’ and sense of place in *Victims* trilogy, examining how the interconnectedness of bioregion, nature, landscape, animals and people evoke a higher, metaphysical reality in which political and religious conflict is seen as illusory. Through McCabe’s writing, I suggest that old grudges, hatred and ethnic violence are seen as trivial in the face of the truth of our relational world. This is reminiscent of the philosophy of Albert Camus, who believed that the futility of human conflict becomes apparent when confronted with the grander scale of the universe and mortality. In the face of this truth, the ambitions, struggles and rivalries that dominate our lives are ultimately meaningless. In an interview with Adrienne Levy, McCabe recognises the profound influence of the writer on his work. He suggests that Camus’ *The Stranger* had “a powerful effect on [him] and must affect [his] writing’s darkness” (Levy 2018: n.d.). Yet perhaps it is not quite as dark as he envisaged. These borderland stories provide a counterpoint to the senselessness not only of the Troubles but to all conflict rooted in religious and ethnic divisions, vengefulness, and unwillingness to forgive. Through his writing, McCabe provides a glimmer of hope that a different path is possible. Although it would require a more extensive analysis to fully explore the impact of Camus on McCabe’s work, it is worth noting that by integrating Camus’ ideas into his writing, McCabe highlights the divorce between human behaviour and the ontological truth of life.

Beyond its background role as a setting to the Troubles in *Victims*, how does McCabe’s place-world illuminate humankind’s self-destructiveness? In answer to this question, we could consider as a framework of analysis, ecosophist and pacifist Arne Naess’ work on deep ecology. Naess’ ecosophy encourages us to view nature not as something to be used by humans, as is the case with shallow ecology, but with respect for the “intrinsic worth of all living beings” (Naess 2008: 27). He also encourages us to “treasure all forms of biological and cultural diversity” (2008: 27). Significantly, Naess’ ecosophy is heavily influenced by the principals of liberal humanism and sustainability that are upheld by the United Nations. In common with this organization, his view of ecological sustainability does not only address taking care of nature. It goes beyond that and includes addressing deeper issues of social justice, promoting peace, and taking ecological responsibility. Essentially, Naess prioritizes the well-being of humans and their environment together. His reasoning is that freedom from war and violence, as well as the preservation of the environment — “our homeplace” — are intrinsically linked and, thus, equally important (Naess 2008: 4). As J. Baird Callicott puts it, Naess’ ecosophy “plumb[s] the metaphysical and axiological normative depths of ecology” (Callicott 2017: 237). Thus, it provides a suitable lens through which to view McCabe’s place-world because it allows us to see the connection between human behaviour and ecological sustainability.

To achieve ecological sustainability, Naess proposed a Gandhian approach to non-violence. This involves humility, control of the ego, self-realization and deep verbal communication in conflict solution. He describes self-realization — a term which we will return to throughout this paper — as a “mature experience of oneness in diversity” (2008: 37), which means recognizing that all beings are a part of our ‘selves’. For there to be genuine empathy and solidarity with others, then, there must be a sense of identification that goes beyond the “individualistic lone ego” and “the conditioned sense of historical self” (Naess 2008: 37) to an identification with the place-world. A world that embraces these elements would be one that has reached what he calls a state of maturity, which is not unachievable, but takes time. Essentially optimistic, he thought that we would not see a world that had reached it until the twenty-second century. However, the Good Friday Agreement, signed on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1998, was a step towards this state of maturity in Northern Ireland, which was achieved through a process of deep communication. This allowed local people to set aside their historical ‘selves’ and strive towards peace in these conflicted regions. This is a great achievement, especially considering it happened in McCabe’s lifetime. It serves, thus, as a sign of hope that progress can be made on a more universal scale in the coming years.

For those unfamiliar with McCabe’s trilogy, *Victims* comprises three stories, ‘Cancer’, ‘Heritage’ and ‘Siege’, previously broadcast on Ireland’s National Television and Radio Broadcaster, RTÉ (1973) and published together in *Christ in the Fields, A Fermanagh Trilogy* (1993) and later in *Heaven Lies about Us* (2005). These stories provide multiple perspectives of the conflict, whether Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or Republican. The first story, ‘Cancer’ is seen through a Catholic Republican lens. Its title not only refers to a physical disease, slowly wearing away the life of Jodie McMahon, but serves as a potent metaphor for corrosive sectarianism. The following, ‘Heritage’, explores the Unionist viewpoint of a protestant farmer who begrudgingly joins the Ulster Defence Regiment. He finally commits suicide by driving through an army checkpoint after the IRA threatened his life. The final story ‘Siege’, re-titled ‘Victims’ in *Christ in the Fields* and *Heaven Lies about Us*, unites both viewpoints. An old aristocratic family, with the Colonel as patriarchal figure at home in their mansion, find themselves held to ransom by a small group of fervent IRA terrorists. Tragedy occurs through their inability to communicate their viewpoints and to leave aside the past. Thus, by viewing the conflict through opposing lenses, these narratives expose the impoverishment of all lives, whatever their politics, religion or ethnic standpoint. Indeed, there are no victors, only victims.

We will begin by analysing the titles of the original trilogy, *Christ in the Fields*, and the later collection, *Heaven Lies about Us* to uncover their shared sense of relationality. The latter implies that ‘Heaven’ or ‘paradise’, is not an abstract, disconnected concept, but rather can be found on Earth in the environment, and in life in all its complexities. Perhaps such an interpretation befits McCabe’s disbelief in an afterlife (*The Irish Times*, 1998: n.d.). The idea, however, is echoed in William Wordsworth’s poem “Ode: Imitations of Immortality”, which states “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” (Wordsworth 1807: verse v). This poem reflects the idea that as adults, we can forget the beauty of nature because of distractions and artificialities. The title *Christ in the Fields* has similar connotations, and it references the biblical parable of the ‘Treasure in the Field’ and the ‘Pearl of Great Price’ found in Matthew, chapter 13. The parables suggest that godliness can be found on earth amongst people, and if we shed ourselves of existential inauthenticity, or those elements distracting from what is genuinely “at stake” in life (Guignon 1993: 227), then we may be able to perceive it. Harrison Hall provides a succinct definition of existential inauthenticity as that into “which we flee or fall to avoid anxiety and its unsettling revelations” (1993: 138). For the current discussion in which I consider the concept of inauthenticity from an ecological perspective, I view it as elements of behaviour or something that distracts from a greater reality, which is “the dynamic,

relational nature of the physical world” (Spretnak 2011: 13). Thus, the connotation of these stories’ titles seems clear, it is up to us to see the treasure; in other words, the beauty of the world and what makes life worth living, beyond all worthless and futile distractions, including dogmatic religion, nationalisms, vanities, egotisms and political manoeuvring. For Naess, the field would be the homeplace or our place-world, and we must be mindful not solely of its beauty but the need to see these inauthentic traits of human behaviour as mere distractions from the essential elements necessary to an ecological self that exists in harmonious, peaceful dwelling in the world.

McCabe’s story ‘Cancer’ illustrates how human behaviour can be self-destructive and ecologically damaging, ultimately leading to a degradation of the ecological self. For the Catholic smallholder, Dinny McMahan, ethnic conflict arises from a loss suffered centuries before, from the time of the confiscation of land during the plantation (Patterson 2011: 158-59). Having read that the McMahons’ ancestry could be traced to the original Kings expelled by the planters, he maintains a proud sense of ancestral blood. He thus feels he has been deprived of an historical heritage that he needs to reclaim and, albeit unconsciously, has been denied a strong internal sense of self-fulfilment, identity and life-potential. Naess highlights that the loss of the place-world leads to the loss of personal identity, and that “[people’s] self-respect, their self-esteem is impaired” (2008: 87). Displacement means a loss of an “ecological self, that is, a kind of part of ecosystems” (2008: 102), which may lead to conflict and violence. However, Dinny’s belief in violent means of re-claiming his homeplace is ironic: “I know the answer, cut them down, every last one of them, and it’ll come to tha [sic], them or us. They got it with guns, kept it with guns, and guns’ll put them from it” (McCabe 2005: 81).<sup>1</sup> Conscious of his own family history and land-ties, McCabe was acutely aware of the sectarian conflict and accusations of genocide in the confrontation over landownership. He recognised that his grandfather was encouraged to buy the family farm in 1939 to “stop it from falling into the wrong hands” (cited in Patterson, 2011: 158). Thus, Dinny symbolizes a deep sense of displacement and the ensuing destruction of the place-world that remains part of his ecological self and his identity, engendering centuries of violence in the region. McCabe brings the audience into the narrative to perceive the profound consequences of the destruction of the homeplace caused by imperialism and its underlying patriarchal forces. Dogmatic religious beliefs, ethnic prejudice and heightened masculinities bring about further destruction. And as Naess posits, “to turn the tide [on such policies] seems politically over-whelmingly difficult” (2008: 102). And at the time of writing these stories, a facile solution to the Troubles may have seemed just as difficult. But, as Naess would agree, nobody gains in real terms regarding human self-realization and life-potentiality. There are only losers. Dinny, moreover, may indeed embody the loss of an ecological self through displacement and imperialism, but he also actively participates in furthering this loss through self-destructive behaviours. His incapacity to relinquish a sense of historical injustice, his violent solution, and his own sense of righteousness regarding landownership merges him with ‘one of them’ — to use the character Isabel Lynam’s words about her own actions in the short story ‘Victims’. In addition, his sense of heightened masculinity is another factor that contributes to limiting his potential in life. Let us now examine this further.

As we have seen, one of the main aims of Naess’ ecosophy is to reduce the “self-destructiveness of present globally relevant human behaviour” (Naess 2008: 103) to promote sustainability and peaceful co-existence. Echoing his eco-feminist influences, Naess equates false masculinities with the self-destructive behaviour inherent to the loss of an ecological self, undermining self-realization and, thus, life potential. Besides Dinny, who we will return to shortly, this is patently embodied in the characters of Leonard, Gallagher and the McAleer

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<sup>1</sup> All further references to ‘Cancer’, ‘Heritage’ and ‘Victims’ published in *Heaven Lies About Us* (2005) will be to this edition.

brothers — McCabe writes that for Gallagher, “all females were for screwing in ditches or cars [and] he boasted his prowess as lover and killer [...]” (162). Gallagher thus appears the epitome of self-destructive heightened masculinity. McCabe emphasizes the contrast between the violent masculinity of the male characters and Lynam’s femininity and her reverence for nature, thereby illustrating not only the detrimental effects of disregarding the equal worth of all beings on the environment but also the ecological self. Violence done to the environment and to the Other is violence done to one’s ‘self’. As Naess puts it, “everything hangs together [and] applies to the self and its relation to other living beings, ecosystems, the ecosphere, and the earth, with its long history” (Naess 2008: 87). Furthermore, sitting at the side of the river observing its eternal flow, Lynam is reminded of what is ultimately important in life, leading her to question the worth of her actions and to regret having sacrificed “the blood of her blood” — she had had an abortion — for such a worthless cause as nationalism (153). Her thoughts create an ironic contrast with both the male characters and the brothers’ mother, Mrs McAleer, who is similarly convinced that her sons’ sacrifice of their “blood” to the cause is heroic. But, unlike Lynam, the mother fails to perceive the deception.

The hunting scene in ‘Heritage’, recalls Naess’ ecofeminism which is a critique of anthropocentric patriarchy, suppression and exploitation by dominant forces. This critique expresses the violation of ecology by these forces. The scene also draws attention to the existential absurdity of political land borders and disputes over landownership. Dinny reappears, this time with a shotgun on his arm. His declaration that he could “kill all the otters in Ulster” (117) as long as they were not on his land, suggests a disregard for nature over his own interests. ‘Heritage’ thus aptly captures a sense of destruction of the ecological homeplace in which all sentient beings are the ultimate victims, whether men, women, or animals. The dogs follow their master’s orders to their detriment. Rachel is also drawn into the deceit of patriarchal forces. And both remain victims of exploitative patriarchy. The hunted otter, however, oblivious to human behaviour, still has its homeland. Unbounded by political borders, innocent of political conflicts and disputes over landownership, it serves to remind us that nature far outweighs any value that humans might bestow upon it, in the same way as value is falsely conferred upon a “trophy” (114). Moreover, the American’s observation that the rat was “not quite a trophy” (114) highlights the Colonel’s status as a member of the wealthy colonial forces who once engaged in trophy hunting to symbolize their masculine prowess, social standing and hunting success. This comment ultimately points to the Colonel’s historical position and social class as part of the colonizing forces, as well as to the hollowness of human vanity. McCabe certainly paints a dismal picture of both Dinny and the Colonel — victims not only of their own historical status but also patriarchal anthropocentrism, which as Naess notes, undermines all, including the exploiting forces. From the viewpoint of ecosophy, nobody has gained anything in terms of self-realization. Like the lower classes and women, the dogs, who are perhaps fearful of abandonment, ill-treatment or as an act of survival, also appear to be dragged into the deception. Acting only on orders, they remain faithful to their masters. But as Dinny, shackled by his own hatred and sense of injustice, fires shotgun rounds into a pond seriously injuring one of them, we are perhaps left with the unsettling sensation that, in an ethical sense, he has indeed become ‘one of them’. As Ghandi stated. “[t]he greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” (cited in *timesofindia.com*. n.d.).

Furthermore, the hunting scene can be read through the lens of speciesism, which is the idea that all sentient beings, regardless of their species, gender or any other characteristics, are equal and should not be subject to indiscriminate persecution. Speciesism, a term popularized by Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation* (1975), refers to the practice of justifying the moral superiority of one species over another. Its opponents, including Naess, “have claimed that it is exactly analogous to racism, sexism and other forms of irrational discrimination and

prejudice” (Wise, n.d.), ultimately undermining life potentiality. During the hunting trip, Rachel questions the motive behind hunting the “brown fluffy fellows” (115), to which the American replies that they “eat trout”. Rachel’s response, “so do we”, highlights the fact that the otter is just as entitled to its food source as humans. The scene goes on to reveal an ironic situation where Rachel feels relieved when the dog catches a rat instead of the otter, while the others were disappointed. This situation exposes a hierarchical view of nature, like speciesism, that places the value of certain species over others. She may wish for the otter to escape, seemingly revealing a softer side to her, countering the dominant masculinities and patriarchal anthropocentrism of the male characters. But does the rat not have equal moral rights to the otter? Perhaps it is McCabe’s subtle evocation of the rat’s suffering as it “went floating down stream, twitching” (114) that may guard the reader from similarly being drawn into discriminative speciesism and, thus, a hierarchical viewpoint.

Thus, McCabe’s female characters are similarly charmed into living a lie and acting in detriment to their ‘selves’. As a further example, we get a glimpse into the thoughts of the Colonel’s wife through free indirect speech. Wondering what she had found attractive in her husband, she puts it down to his “soldierly bearing, the graceful manners, the family accumulations, in Tudor mellowness” (169) — worthless traits devoid of love. She recognizes the futility of money-oriented and materialistic greed: “Sometime near dawn she had smashed three plates of value against the door of his study” (170). McCabe also emphasizes the material contents of the Colonel’s mansion which, by way of ironic juxtaposition to the presence of death, reveal the worthlessness and existential inauthenticity of materialism. Above all, she recognises the falsity of “infinite politeness, behind something callous; inhuman” (170), with this last word, “inhuman” voiced as direct speech for all to hear. The people present in the room, however, like humanity, would ignore it to their detriment.

Mrs McAleer, the invalid old mother of the McAleer brothers, appears as a satire on the myth of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* — an old woman who calls for the martyrdom of young men willing to fight in the name of freedom from colonial rule. McAleer, bracing herself for the death of her sons, justifies their heroic and faithful sacrifice in the name of God and country by quoting from Patrick Pearse’s poem ‘The Mother’: “[...] and yet I have my joy. My sons were faithful and they fought.” (158). Richard Kearney emphasizes the sacrificial component of Irish myth, present in both pagan and Christian tradition, and which was also evident in the Hunger Strikes of Irish prisoners in the 1980s, as a means of redemption and freedom for Ireland (1988: 218). But Isabel Lynam, unlike the young woman into whom the mythical Ni Houlihan is transformed, knows the absurdity of such sacrifice: “Win or lose nothing changes, because men don’t nor women ... even the blind know that light leads on to darkness” (159). Furthermore, by asserting that there are “[d]ozens” of Jesus Christs who all “hate each other” (159), she challenges McAleer’s dogmatic religious beliefs. As mentioned earlier, we could believe that McAleer had been deluded into religious and patriarchal compliance, and view this as an anachronism. But ultimately, Lynam had been duped for a different reason into allying herself with what Leonard describes as “a movement dominated by power-hungry men, unafraid of violence” (145). Although she had idealistic thoughts of a return to a lost place-world, she no longer knew her own reasons, recognizing also that the men who led the cause believed in nothing more than their own power (152). The question remains as to her motives for joining in the violence.

Indeed, Lynam appears as a plot device through which to view the Camusian Absurd. Reminiscent of Meursault in Camus’ *The Stranger*, she too is an outsider, with “all seeing eyes” (142), a silent commentator whose college education, city demeanour and “feminine softness” (145), so despised by Leonard, provides a contrast to the McAleer brothers and their Northern place-world. We not only view Mrs McAleer through her consciousness, and thus, the falsity, or inauthenticity, of mythical sacrifice in the name of religion and country but also the Absurd:

The seeming naivety of Hugh and Rosie McAleer's two sons masked, she thought, deeper roots, a culture old as pastoral Europe, clamped by history to the dead autocracy of Rome and the arrogant mess of the British Raj, themselves swamped now by the tinfoil gleam of Americana and the creeping threat of Russian paralysis, all beliefs and systems blending as old cultures died, inevitable and melancholy as the music, as the drying of tributaries with the deepening of great rivers. (188)

And yet despite her “troubled consciousness and humanity” (215) and growing empathy for the victims, she does not rebel but rather ironically sacrifices herself to a futile cause. Thus, having unwittingly bought into the sacrificial myth of Ni Houlihan, she has not been true to her ‘self’ nor committed herself to any moral act, or what Naess, following Kant, would term ‘beautiful’ action — one that is performed out of noble inclination. But, as Naess would undoubtedly agree, ‘the cause’ is like a self-inflicted disease, that in the absence of revolt can have only one outcome — self-destructiveness.

Like Camus’ *The Stranger*, ‘Victims’ concludes with a sense of “the benign indifference of the universe” (Camus 1942: 120) to the goings-on of humanity rendering human conflict tragically absurd.<sup>2</sup> McCabe’s use of a lake reappears in this final scene as Harriet invites a reporter to look around him at “the long lake, the great forest beyond and up into the August sun, the blinding sky”. And she declares that “[t]he world is still beautiful.” (219). The word ‘still’ evokes a sense of *despite* all human endeavours, reminding us, viewed from the grander scale of the universe, of the insignificance and existential inconsequence of the events that have taken place in the house. Harriet thus sees beyond the artificialities and inauthenticities of humanity to the beauty of the world, to the ‘Heaven’ that ‘lies about us’. Canon Plumm voices Harriet’s words earlier, reminding us of the previously mentioned parable of ‘Christ in the Fields’ and of the relational nature of the world:

Fear not the sentence of death [...]. The time of death matters not, nor the place, nor the manner. Therefore, be ready, strive for high ideals. Be yourself. [...]. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars [...]. With all its sham, drudgery, its conflicts and broken dreams --- the world is still beautiful. (209)

As well as nature’s indifference to human activities, the lake motif interweaves several symbolic functions: testimony to the troubled borderland, a “challenge to cultural hegemony” (Casey 2009: 237) and, as constitutive of the characters’ place-world, it may also be read as sharing their victimhood. We previously observed how it creates a sense of indifference. However, in ‘Cancer’, the author imbues the lake with human emotions, such as bitterness and anger — “A cold wind blowing from the lake chopped at the water, churning up angry flecks” (78). This personification transforms it into a silent witness of human endeavours and their follies. Attributing human emotions like anger to the lake and describing the dandelions in ‘Victims’ as “puls[ing] with violence” (142), forcing Leonard to look away, not only elevates the value of nature and thus degrades human behaviour but highlights the destructive impact humans have on it. This theme is also evident in the portrayal of the lake as a victim, as seen when the setting sun paints it as a “bloodied gash in the quiet landscape” (168), as observed by the character Harriet while sitting in the bay window. These descriptions serve to remind us of

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<sup>2</sup> In a previous paper on Biyi Bandele Thomas’ World War Two novel, *Burma Boy*, I argued for the use of nature within a Camusian framework in which “nature’s indifference to human activities [...] renders futile and indifferent the soldiers’ deaths, and the war tragic in its absurdity” (Howes 2023. forthcoming). I contend that McCabe also uses a similar technique to highlight the existential absurdity of human conflict.



the interconnectedness between nature and humans and how the latter's actions can have a detrimental effect on the former. In a nutshell, the self-destructive behaviour displayed by the characters in their environment is mirrored *in* that environment. In his extensive work on the notion of place, Edward Casey notes that we also attempt to “colonize [nature] with cultural means” (2009: 237). We also colonize it with political and economic means, portrayed here not only with the border — one side of the lake lies in Northern Ireland and the other in the Republic with an army checkpoint at the end — but also the Colonel and Dinny's conflict over hunting rights and landownership. But nature does not belong to humans — the otters do not belong to either man. But, as Naess affirms, it remains integral to our ecological selves. McCabe's writing is intimately connected to his environment, particularly the lake which inspires the water imagery that remains a recurring theme in his work (*The Irish Times* 1998: n.d.). This natural feature also forms an inseparable part of his characters' place-world, as both the IRA terrorists and the Colonel's family in 'Victims' are frequently reminded of its presence through the mansion's bay window. This view may serve as a poignant reminder of the reality of the place-world beyond the confines of their politically charged and self-destructive environment.

The final scene in 'Victims' and its repetition of the lake motif ultimately emphasize our insignificance in the vastness of the universe. By forming a contrast to the events that have taken place in the house, this scene reminds us of the futility of human conflict. Throughout the trilogy, however, these reminders are ever-present; for example, in 'Victims', Lynam, on hearing a curlew's cry, muses about a 'lost' era prior to colonialism which she imagines to be a time when “God was the tide and all things related; people, fields, sky, life and death, the immemorial land of childhood: lost” (152), reminding us of Wordsworth's words, mentioned earlier, about losing our connection to the wonders of nature in adulthood. This bucolic vision may also be a nod to Celtic pre-Christian times. Another example is in 'Heritage' when Eric assists the birth of a calf. This time, we witness existentialist thoughts through free indirect speech:

and man hath nothing more than beasts. All things go to one place: of earth they are made; to earth they return together. And they knew nothing of love or hate, tithes or time, the packer's knife, the knacker's lorry. And what did he fear? Death? What differ when the body chilled, now of sudden or slowly in a cockloft fifty years from now? (123).

As he brings new life into existence, his words emphasize the existential absurdity of human conflict in the face of death. Inauthentic focus on material worth and the imposition of human constructs, such as time, on the natural rhythms of nature also reflect a deep ecological viewpoint. Furthermore, the phrase '[M]an hath nothing more than beasts', implies that human beings should bestow equal value and right to a dignified existence on the new life he brings into the world, just as they would any other creature.

Finally, the aim of deep ecology necessarily depends on the success of peace movements to attain sustainable world development. To achieve this, Naess suggests that Gandhian non-violent deep communication should be used in conflict resolution, as it involves “freeing oneself from the fetters of disruptive emotions and narrowness of scope” (2008: 221). Without analysing in detail the discourse in 'Victims' or 'Heritage', suffice to say it violates the principles of non-violent communication, including personal accusations, emotional language, evasions, ambiguities, insults and generalizations of opponents' views. The text provides numerous examples of how these violations of deep communication can be seen as a common trait in terrorist discourse. Perhaps the most notable example is that of personal accusations, exemplified by Dinny and the terrorists targeting the Colonel and his family as inheritors of colonial power. As Naess notes of Gandhi, “he [fought] non-violently the *views* of his

opponents, *not the persons* opposing him [...] (2008: 220. original emphasis). The terrorists may believe their confrontational style and personal targeting a faster or more effective way to reach their desired outcomes, but ultimately using such confrontational and disrespectful language undermines not only their cause but the status of their opponents as fellow human-beings in a relational world, making it self-destructive.

Through an ecosophical analysis of McCabe's poetics of place, this article has examined how *Victims* evokes the loss of the place-world engendered by patriarchal anthropocentrism at the core of colonialism, leading to the privation of an ecological self that ultimately diminishes self-realization. We have also discussed how, embedded in that cultural and natural place-world, McCabe's characters act in detriment to their 'selves' via self-destructive behaviours; these include: aligning themselves with patriarchal practices — not profoundly differing from those of the colonial forces at the heart of the conflict; overlooking the relational quality of the place-world and themselves as an inalienable part; indulging in inauthentic and self-destructive behaviours like greed, vanity and excessive attention to material worth, including land possession, and disregarding the need for peace-making through deep communication as the only viable way forward. We have also seen how juxtapositions between nature, and ecological and existential thinking forms a contrast with human actions, highlighting self-destructiveness. In this regard, I briefly mentioned that the inclusion of Camusian existentialist philosophy in the text further contributes to a sense of divorce between the relational reality of the world and human behaviour.

Deep ecology, in its attention to ecological diversity, holds strong values of social justice, sustainability, equality and freedom, with ethical and moral roots in liberal humanism. Thus, an ecosophical reading of the place-world in McCabe's text has not only made salient these values encapsulated within the narrative but revealed the universality of his writing beyond the topographical boundaries of the Irish borderlands. To address present socio-political concerns, Naess' ecosophy and the viewpoint of liberal humanism in McCabe's text are based on values shared by both the European Union and the United Nations in their sustainable development objectives for the twenty-first century. In this context, McCabe's tales offer a hopeful perspective for humanity, despite their dark content. Furthermore, the signing of the Good Friday Agreement may have brought about a more promising outlook in McCabe's native region.

Ultimately, McCabe's *Victims* trilogy functions as a powerful metaphor for two essential inter-related values: liberal humanism and ecological sustainability. Through the place-world, the text demonstrates the importance of shedding self-destructive behaviours, and embracing mutual trust, sharing and deep communication. As I conclude this discussion, I am hopeful that it has contributed not only to the growing field of Irish ecological criticism and ecocriticism but also to furthering scholarly attention to an Irish writer whose work embodies social justice, tolerance and equality. Colm Tóibín's remark, cited at the beginning of this article, highlights the fact that McCabe is an exceptional writer who certainly deserves greater recognition.

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