

“Sex, loyalty, betrayal and unexpected love:” the landscape of Neil Jordan’s
fiction writing and films

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A Thesis

In

The Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts (Film Studies) at Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

July 2006

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ISBN: 978-0-494-20808-3

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ISBN: 978-0-494-20808-3

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Abstract

Neil Jordan is widely considered to be one of Ireland's preeminent filmmakers. Interestingly, Jordan's less-recognized career as a writer has been overshadowed by his clout as a filmmaker, despite its high quality. As a result, much of his work has not received the critical assessment and analysis to which it is undoubtedly entitled.

This study seeks to understand the many connections and intersections between Jordan's literature and film. It hopes to bridge a gap in the critical reception of Jordan's work which has, so far, looked only fleetingly into the intersections between his published writing and his contributions to cinema.

The imagery, themes and plot points from Jordan's fiction writing and film overlap; the woven character of his work is never capricious – he is clearly working within a very specific and personal worldview, one that is informed as much by his personal experiences and visions of the world as by his awareness and interaction with Irish history and nationalism. This paper carefully considers the development of Jordan's fiction writing from the late 1970s, alongside his burgeoning career as a filmmaker, particularly considering how his first two publications – *Night in Tunisia and Other Stories* (1976) and *The Past* (1980) – have influenced his later work.

What follows is a loosely chronological exploration of Jordan's fiction writing, as it corresponds to – and is distinguished from – his cinematic work in cinema. I will argue that through a close exploration of Jordan's earlier writing, a better understanding of his later work can be gleaned.

Acknowledgements

I must first of all thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as well as Concordia University and the Centre for Canadian Irish Studies at Concordia. Without their respective financial assistance this project would not have been possible.

I am also indebted to Dr. Carole Zucker, whose guidance and advice on my research was matched only by her unwavering support of my overall scholarship and my academic development over the past several years. Thank you.

Finally, for his years of encouragement, boundless patience and deft editing skills at all hours of the day and night, I am forever grateful to Michael Baker.

Table of Contents

Published Work/Filmography	vi-vii
Introduction: <i>Early Life</i>	4
<i>Testing the Margins</i>	7
Chapter One: <i>Night In Tunisia and Other Stories</i>	13
<i>The influence of “Night in Tunisia” on Jordan’s later work</i>	19
Chapter Two: <i>The Past: a foundation</i>	38
<i>Landscape and Memory</i>	44
<i>Love Triangles</i>	47
<i>Politics: The Past and Michael Collins</i>	50
<i>Catholicism</i>	56
Chapter Three: <i>Fantasy, trinity, development of themes</i>	60
<i>The Dream of a Beast</i>	61
<i>Later work: building on themes</i>	68
- <i>Family, Trinity and the Sea</i>	68
- <i>Catholic Influcence</i>	77
- <i>Performance</i>	80
Conclusion: <i>Recent Work: Shade and Breakfast on Pluto</i>	86
Works Cited	96

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Neil Jordan's Filmography

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The Company of Wolves, 1984

Mona Lisa, 1986

High Spirits, 1988

We're No Angels, 1989

The Miracle, 1991

The Crying Game, 1992

Interview with the Vampire, 1994

Michael Collins, 1996

The Butcher Boy, 1997

In Dreams, 1999

The End of the Affair, 1999

Not I, 2000

The Good Thief, 2002

Breakfast on Pluto, 2005

INTRODUCTION

Neil Jordan is widely considered to be one of Ireland's preeminent filmmakers. Certainly, he is the country's most prolific director of any generation, having made more films than any of his contemporaries.¹ Moreover, Jordan's work has been more consistently successful than other Irish filmmakers and, on several occasions, he has brought locally-made Irish film to the world stage. Despite his commitment to commercial filmmaking (as opposed to its independently made counterpart) he is Ireland's most artistically committed director. Among Irish filmmakers whose work is known internationally, he is truly one of very few.

In twenty four years of making movies, Jordan's output has been impressive: he has produced fourteen feature films and one short since 1982. In a country with an indigenous film culture lagging behind the rest of the developed world and which continues to suffer budget setbacks and inadequate government support, Neil Jordan's consistent – and commercially viable – productivity emerges as an anomaly.² Although many of his films have met with critical and popular dismissal – perhaps the result of poor studio management and loss of artistic control (as with *High Spirits* (1988), *We're*

¹ In this group we might well include filmmakers Jim Sheridan and Pat O'Connor, who have all received varying degrees of acclaim both in Ireland and abroad, as well as members of Ireland's first wave of independent filmmakers whose work tends to be less well known outside of Irish film scholarship: Bob Quinn, Cathal Black, Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Joe Comerford and Margo Harkin to name the movement's most often heralded members. Of the current wave of younger Irish filmmakers, working on feature films since roughly the mid-1990s, no filmmaker has yet come close to Jordan's remarkable track record of just under one film per year since 1982.

² Ireland's first independent film is generally considered to be Bob Quinn's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (Lament for Art O'Leary, Kevin Rockett, 1988, pp. 137-8; Martin McLoone, 2000, 131; Ruth Barton, 2004, 87). The film was made at the relatively late date of 1975 and is widely credited as the catalyst to Ireland's indigenous filmmaking culture following decades of industry stagnation and unsatisfying cinematic representation of the Irish by "outsider filmmakers," usually from Britain or America. *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* was also the world's first Irish language film, an astonishingly late arrival in a country that, for much of the mid-20th century, championed the revival of the indigenous language. This production date – 1975 – makes Ireland's indigenous film industry significantly younger than that of other filmmaking nations.

No Angels (1989)), or simply because they are misunderstood (*The Company of Wolves* (1984), *In Dreams* (1999)) – as many have been lauded around the world and several of these have received prestigious prizes and awards. His most well-known films are international household names, grossing many times over their budgets at the box office (*The Crying Game* (1993), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994)), while his lesser-known films have often been praised as artistic masterpieces and signposts for the potential of Irish filmmaking (particularly *Angel* (1982) and *The Butcher Boy* (1997)).

Interestingly, Jordan's less-recognized career as a writer has been overshadowed by his clout as a filmmaker despite its high quality. Since 1976, the artist has published three acclaimed novels, a novella and an award-winning collection of short stories. In fact, it is Jordan's fiction writing that first brought him acclaim, both in Ireland and internationally, though his films quickly outnumbered his major literary publications.³ By the mid-nineties, his increasing commitment to filmmaking over writing prompted the *Irish Times* literary critic, Eileen Battersby, to comment that "fiction's loss [...] was filmmaking's gain" (Rockett and Rockett 9).

There is, perhaps at first, very little correlation between Jordan's writing and his films. But upon closer inspection, themes become apparent as does Jordan's distinctive voice and narrative preferences. This study seeks to understand the many connections between Jordan's literature and film. It hopes to bridge a gap in the critical reception of Jordan's work which has, so far, looked only fleetingly into the intersections between his published writing and his contributions to cinema. Indeed, even the short essays, book

³ Jordan was honoured in Hollywood at a gala celebrating Irish writing in Film in March, 2006. His latest film, *Breakfast on Pluto*, had been released in North American theatres in late 2005. The celebration included fellow honorees Jim Sheridan and composer David Holmes (whose connection to writing in film is unclear).

chapters and reviews of his films – the artistic form for which he is better known – do not abound. Despite the runaway success of several of Jordan's films both at home and internationally – especially with *The Crying Game*, *Interview with the Vampire* and *Michael Collins* (1996) – much of his work has not received the critical assessment and analysis to which it is undoubtedly entitled, although a forthcoming book by Dr. Carole Zucker will begin to correct this.⁴

Particularly where his fiction writing is concerned, Jordan's work has been very rarely discussed in terms of its contribution to and connection with his filmmaking. Lori Rogers' book, *Feminine Nation: Performance, Gender and Resistance in the Works of John McGahern and Neil Jordan* (1998), does consider Jordan's writing and film, but from a specific perspective: the place of women in Irish nation building and post-colonial nationalism. Accordingly, her study takes into account only four of Jordan's works: *The Past* (1980), *The Dream of a Beast* (1983), *The Miracle* (1991), and *The Crying Game*. Critical or academic acknowledgement of Jordan's fiction writing alongside his work as a film director is almost entirely contained within Rogers' study and the slim first chapter of Emer and Kevin Rockett's *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries*, a book that is a part of a series investigating contemporary Irish writers and filmmakers. As of 2006, *Exploring Boundaries* remains the only full-length study of Jordan's films and it takes as its first chapter's subject his "early career" as a fledgling writer and director of the forty-six minute documentary, *The Making of Exalibur: Myth into Film*, in 1981. There is also meant to be a book forthcoming from film scholar Keith Hopper who, in a 2003 special film edition of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, was working on a full-length study

⁴ Zucker, Carole. *The Cinema of Neil Jordan: Beauty and Terror*. London: Wallflower Press, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

of Jordan's fiction and film, though, at the date of writing, there is no further information on its publication.⁵ As yet, a more comprehensive and comparative study of Jordan's creative oeuvre – both in writing and filmmaking – has not been published. The original research contained within this study aims to address this oversight.

The title of this paper is taken from a review of Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* in the *New York Times*. On 4 December, 1992, critic Janet Maslin described the film as brilliantly original, complex, passionate and precise. These accolades could well describe the bulk of Jordan's work throughout his voluminous career, in fiction writing and filmmaking, beginning in earnest in the late 1970s. Recurrent images and themes, especially as they pertain to sex, loyalty, betrayal and unexpected love can be found throughout much of Jordan's work and this paper aims to uncover and explore these and other similarities in his films and writing which, together, form a coherent, sometimes autobiographical, always emotionally intense and ideologically questioning oeuvre.

Early Life

Jordan was born in 1950 in County Sligo, a rural area in the northwest of Ireland, the first child of Michael and Angela Jordan (a sister, Eithne, was born in 1954). The Jordans lived in a small, seaside resort town in the north of Sligo until 1952, when the family moved to Dublin, where they vacationed thereafter at the local seaside resorts (Rockett and Rockett 3). Jordan's homes as an adult have also bordered the sea and this constant relationship to the Irish seaside has clearly influenced all stages of his work. His father, a school teacher and amateur musician, evidently restricted access to popular culture as

⁵ Hopper, Keith. "Contributors Notes" *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. Vol 29, No 2. Fall/Autumn 2003, p 8.

much as possible, to his children's apparent dismay: visits to the cinema were few and far between and there was no television in the home. Consequently, Jordan's father appears to have influenced Neil's early years profoundly; his writing and films are full of strained father-son relationships. His mother, a painter, no doubt had a significant influence on her children's lives as well: Eithne is now a landscape painter of some renown and both children are members of *Aosdána*, an affiliation of Irish creative artists to which Eithne has joined as a Visual Artist while Neil, curiously, has joined strictly as a creative writer.⁶

Jordan's career began, first and foremost, as a writer. While struggling to make ends meet in his early twenties with a wife and two young daughters, he took menial jobs and published short stories as often as possible, beginning in 1974. Upon the second publication of his collection of short stories, *Night in Tunisia and Other Stories*, in 1978, Jordan won the prestigious *Guardian* Fiction prize.⁷

Perhaps appropriately, Jordan's first foray into filmmaking was as a writer: he won a coveted Film Script Award in 1979 to complete a short script. The award, part of a newly established (and long awaited) incentive program from the Irish Film Institute's Arts Council, was then one of the only sources for indigenous filmmaking in the country, and was granted to many Irish filmmakers of the day who went on to make the films that are considered to be the exemplars of the first wave of indigenous film production in Ireland⁸. The short script Jordan produced, "Travellers" follows travelers Angela Devine

⁶ *Aosdána* official website listing of members: <http://www.artscouncil.ie/aosdana/members.html> Eithne has also been distinguished as a recipient of the *Aosdána*'s annual *Cnuas* – an Arts Council grant for creative artists. See Emer Rockett and Kevin Rockett's chapter on Jordan's formative years and early work: "Early Career," in *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries*. Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003.

⁷ See Rockett & Rockett, 2003, pg 5. The date quoted there is, in fact, 1979 and is said to be a joint winner, though according to the *Guardian*'s webpage listing past award winners, Jordan was, in fact, the only recipient of the award in 1978. <http://facstaff.unca.edu/moseley/guardian.html>

⁸ Most notably Bob Quinn, who was the first recipient of the award in 1978; he used the money to help fund the making of *Poitín* (1979).

and Michael Connors around the West of Ireland.⁹ Joe Comerford eventually made the script into a film, *Traveller*, in 1981. While Jordan has since said in an interview that Comerford's film was interesting, he admits, "it wasn't the film I'd written" (Rockett and Rockett 10).

The late 1970s and early 1980s held a flurry of activity for the relatively young newcomer, both in fiction writing and in film. In 1980, his first novel, *The Past*, was published to rave reviews. The novel depicts one man's morose search for the truth of his mother's life and, therefore, his own origins. This quest is explored in the second chapter. Considering that Jordan's next filmmaking venture was hardly a creative one - John Boorman commissioned him to make a short promotional documentary, *The Making of Exalibur: Myth into Film*, in 1981 - it is not surprising that Jordan was eager to begin work on *Angel*, a film based on his original screenplay, later that year. The film was strongly backed by Boorman and funded extravagantly (by contemporary Irish standards) with money from the newly founded Irish Film Board and Britain's burgeoning Channel 4.

Aside from the sheer volume of his work over the past few decades, Jordan is also distinguished as having written - or co-written with the original authors, in the case of his adaptations - all of these film scripts. He wrote both *Angel* and *The Crying Game* directly for the screen in 1980, while he was in Northern Ireland (McIlroy 2001, 71). *Mona Lisa*, *The Miracle* and *Michael Collins* are also original screenplays, while *The Company of Wolves*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *The Butcher Boy* and *Breakfast on Pluto* were all written in collaboration with the writers of the novels and original stories (respectively:

⁹ Travellers is the name given to Irish itinerants, who are often likened to gypsies in their roving and aimless perusal of the countryside. As Rockett and Rockett point out, the names Jordan gives to his two main characters, the married couple Angela and Michael, are the names of his parents as well.

Angela Carter, Anne Rice and Patrick McCabe).¹⁰ *The End of the Affair* and *The Good Thief* were both adapted from the original novel and screenplay by Graham Greene and Jean-Pierre Melville, respectively, while *In Dreams* is loosely based on Bari Wood's novel and was co-written by Jordan and Bruce Robinson. *Not I*, a short film produced as a part of a larger multi-director series of Samuel Beckett adaptations, was filmed entirely with Beckett's original 1972 script for the stage play.

Testing the Margins

As an artist, Jordan has successfully straddled two media, though as a writer he works within a milieu with a longer-standing tradition.¹¹ Ireland's literary tradition is a national treasure. The Irish Literature Revival, in particular, cemented Ireland's dedication to and strength in indigenous writing. Briefly, the Revival is understood to have slowly come to fruition in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, when the struggle for independence from imperial Britain began to shape the nation, both politically and socially, and a greater emphasis was placed on the revival of the Irish language as well as traditional music and sport. At the same time, emerging work from Irish writers – Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, Edward Martyn and John Millington Synge, to name a few – was celebrated as forming a distinct voice and speaking for the Irish people with a National Literature, drawing on Irish mythology to define Irish identity and destiny, as distinguished from British culture, literature and

¹⁰ Although David Leland developed the original script for *Mona Lisa*, Jordan found it completely devoid of the romance he wanted to evoke and far too violent. His star on the film, Bob Hoskins, rejected the script and Jordan re-wrote it, although Leland still shares the credit with Jordan (Rockett and Rockett 63).

¹¹ Film is a relatively new medium, of course, but in Ireland film culture is especially green; Jordan's earlier work in this industry is a part of the foundational "first wave" of indigenous Irish filmmaking, which emerged at the astonishingly late date of the mid-seventies and early eighties.

colonial rule. Scholar Richard Kearney has identified this movement as one side of an opposing tendency in Irish literature: led by Yeats and sponsoring mythology, the writers of the Revival

offered the myth of Mother Ireland as spiritual or symbolic compensation for the colonial calamities of historical reality. The mythological Mother would restore the lost national identity by calling her sons to the sacred rite of blood-sacrifice [during the struggle for independence] whereby they would re-enter the sacred time which transcends historical time – and thus undo the wrongs of history (Kearney 70).

The literature of this movement was characterized by “symbols of unity and self-possession” whereas the opposing movement, led by writers like Samuel Beckett, Flann O’Brien and James Joyce,

resolved to demythologise the pretensions of the Revival in the name of a thoroughgoing modernism; it endeavoured to liberate literature from parochial preoccupations with identity into the universal concern of language as an endlessly self-creative process. [...] Beckett promoted a counter-tradition of Irish authors who embraced a modernist Continental literature of self-reflection. [...] What Beckett admired in these authors was the admission that they belonged ‘nowhere’ – their refusal to drop through the escape-hatch of myth whereby the ‘self is either most happily obliterated or else so improved and enlarged as to be mistaken for the décor.’ [...] The very idea of a National Literature was nonsense for Beckett (Kearney 69, 70, 72).

If these two tendencies can still reasonably be used to categorize contemporary writers, then Neil Jordan seems to be doubly engaged. That is to say he straddles these two tendencies, equally fascinated by Irish symbolism and Celtic mythology as he is by the redefinition of Irish culture in a wholly post-colonial setting. Indeed, as both a writer and a filmmaker, Jordan not only explores boundaries – as the title of Emer and Kevin Rockett’s book suggests – but also pushes past them, often using the language of traditional Irish symbolism – where landscape, religion and the family loom large – to thoroughly subvert our expectations, presenting a post-colonial view of the Irish landscape, as well as its religion and family, but also offering us his view of more universal human truths, proving not that he “belongs nowhere,” but rather that he belongs to an international artistic milieu.

Eugene O’Brian’s introduction to Emer and Kevin Rockett’s book explains, “Irish literature and film has often been viewed as obsessed with the past, but contemporary writers and filmmakers seem to be involved in a process of negotiation between the Ireland of the past and the Ireland of the coming times” (ix). Jordan in particular represents an important version of the contemporary Irish artist for his successful negotiation of past and present in the form of his transformation from writer of literary fiction to filmmaker.¹² Within Jordan’s work, plot points from both his fiction writing and film overlap; the woven character of his work is never capricious – he is clearly working within a very specific and personal worldview, one that is informed as much by

¹² “Fintan O’Toole notes that [Jordan’s] work ‘represents not just one man’s pursuit of ideas and ambitions, but a significant shift in a nation’s culture.’ By starting out as a writer of literary fiction and then ‘re-inventing’ himself as a filmmaker, ‘he symbolizes a much bigger change in the way the country sees itself.’” (Rockett and Rockett, 14, quoting a 1996 article by Fintan O’Toole for *Independent on Sunday*)

his personal experiences and visions of the world as by his awareness and interaction with Irish history and nationalism.

In addition to the sex, loyalty, betrayal and unexpected love to which Janet Maslin refers, Jordan's work has also often been described as "the intertwining of eroticism, death and an equivocal sense of the sacred" – all marks of the Jordanian signature according to *Irish Times* film critic Hugh Linehan. Emer and Kevin Rockett continue this attempt to define Jordan's work as a collection of themes and moods when they state in the introduction to *Exploring Boundaries*:

It is these notions around appearance, reality and 'unreality', or the irrational; the psycho-sexual dynamics of the family, but most especially around the young male and the oedipal triangulation of desire; the interrelationship of private and public; the (im)possibility of transformation and the blurring of categories other than in negative terms; an enjoyment of the sensual, of fantasy and the impossible made possible, that inform Jordan's work. Indeed, for a writer/director to have worked successfully not just in and across so many genres, but within the local and international markets of Ireland, Europe and the USA, it is unsurprising that the trope of mutability should figure (Rockett and Rockett 1).

What follows is a study of Jordan's work. It contains original research comparing his writing – short stories, novella and novels – to his films. The first chapter offers an overview of his first major publication, *Night in Tunisia and Other Stories* (1976), exploring the particularly strong links between the collection's middle and last stories,

“Night in Tunisia” and “A Love” and Jordan’s later work. The second chapter looks at Jordan’s next major publication: his first novel, *The Past* (1980). Already, at this early stage in his career, a distinctive voice emerges in these two publications; the themes and imagery developed in this early fiction carry through most of Jordan’s subsequent work and can be considered as the sounding board upon which much of his subsequent work resounds. This development of similar themes in Jordan’s later work is the subject of the study’s third chapter. It concentrates on the proliferation of themes – developed in these early publications – throughout his subsequent publications and, increasingly, his films.

The themes developed in Jordan’s earlier books – Irish Catholic childhood, lapsed Catholic reverence, father/son struggle, sexual desire and coming of age, the Irish family, the role of women in the family, the personal in the political and the use of Irish history and politics to provide a backdrop for emotional/romantic stories – have particularly strong relationships to Irish nationalism in writing and film throughout the 20th century, though time and again, Jordan deviates from the typical, using familiar Irish imagery only to subvert the country’s idyllic landscape and ideological politics in refreshing and often unexpected ways.

Due to space limitations, this paper cannot discuss all of Jordan’s work in depth. For example, those films not dealing directly with Ireland and Irish life are not discussed at length. Furthermore, the examination does not include an analysis of *High Spirits* (1988), a film which Jordan has said was taken out of his control by American producers and which he does not consider to be a part of his oeuvre (Rockett and Rockett, 73).¹³ Instead, the paper carefully considers the development of Jordan’s fiction writing from the late 1970s, alongside his burgeoning career as a filmmaker. The study concludes with

¹³ See also Dr. Carole Zucker’s forthcoming book on the director.

a brief analysis of Jordan's most recent film *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), based on Patrick McCabe's novel. This will look at the ways in which the source material evolves to conform to a particularly Jordanian worldview. This study essentially aims to find connections with Jordan's evocative first publications in order to gauge how these now familiar themes are carried through to his most recent work. What follows is a loosely chronological exploration of Jordan's fiction writing, as it corresponds to – and is distinguished from – his work in cinema. I will argue that through a close exploration of Jordan's earlier writing, a better understanding of his later work can be gleaned.

CHAPTER ONE: EARLY FICTIONS

Night in Tunisia and Other Stories

The common denominator in Jordan's fiction writing and his cinema is a focus on interior lives, and earnest and committed studies of what is human and fallible. Though both his fictions and films often take place amidst recognizable politically turbulent times in Irish history – “A Love,” *The Past*, *Angel*, *The Crying Game*, *Michael Collins*, *The Butcher Boy* and *Breakfast on Pluto* – Jordan's concentration always tends toward the emotional journey rather than the documentation of the political or patriotic. It is also true that Jordan's work contains a catholic curiosity; his work is not limited to a particular genre, his character portraits are diverse and multi-layered, his topics of interest, although he approaches them with a consistently idiosyncratic style, vary widely, especially from film to film. These qualities distinguish him considerably from Ireland's literary – and cinematic – tradition, which has often been described as myopic, backward-looking and even “obsessed with the past” (i.e. O'Brian in Rockett and Rockett ix).¹⁴

Jordan's interest in characters and their thoughts, especially in his earlier work, usually focuses on a single character. This is most certainly the case for *Night in Tunisia and Other Stories* (1976), where all but one short story within the collection is told from a single character perspective; the exception is “Outpatient,” which includes the interior monologues of both husband and wife. This impressive short story collection was

¹⁴ In fact, Ireland's film culture was characterized, for most of the 20th century, by failure and false starts, in no small part due to the country's stern policy of cultural isolation, which, until the late 1950s, viewed with suspicion all forms of popular culture, especially those it deemed “foreign;” namely film and popular music. The few films produced in and about Ireland down to the mid-1970s tended to make much of its colonial past, its struggle for independence and Civil War (see especially Ruth Barton, 2004; Martin McLoone, 2000; Gibbons, Rockett and Hill, 1987). Only with the process of modernization and the emerging new wave in cinema – of which Jordan is a member – did films begin (slowly) to shed this “obsession” with the past.

Jordan's first major publication – originally published when the author was just twenty-six – and is composed of ten stories that are, in tone, theme and content, inextricably connected to each other and to Jordan's longer novels, as well as his films. The following analysis of the collection looks at each story in the order in which they were published in the 1993 reprint of the collection in *A Neil Jordan Reader*.

"Last Rites" was originally published as "Last Rite" in a 1975 issue of *Stand*, a British literary magazine. According to Jordan, it was the first story he ever wrote (Linehan, *Irish Times*, 27 Jan 2000). At the time, he was living in London with his two daughters and his first wife, Vivienne Shields, a young law student to whom the collection is dedicated.¹⁵ Appropriately, the story chronicles the lonely suicide of a "young builder's labourer" in a London public bathhouse (Jordan 1993, 5). At the time, Jordan was himself a manual labourer, so it is tempting to read autobiography into the story of a frustrated and exhausted but contemplative young man, particularly when he describes his "Dublin childhood" and "a summer spent on Laytown Strand", a seaside resort perhaps forty kilometers north of Dublin, in County Meath (ibid 8). As mentioned in the introduction, Jordan grew up in the Dublin suburbs, vacationing with his family each summer at many nearby beach resorts.¹⁶ Just three pages in to the collection's only story set overtly in Britain, Jordan's attachment to home is obvious and especially contrasts with his sense of London's lonely anonymity. The nameless protagonist arrives at the bathhouse after a day of work, waits in line observing the other blue-collar

¹⁵ Emer and Kevin Rockett's first chapter on the director gives a brief account of this stage of Jordan's life.

¹⁶ Laytown is home to an iconic – if antiquated – national pastime: a mid-summer horserace which takes place on the beach – an idyllic event typified in Irish film as early as *Hangman's House* (John Ford, USA, 1928), and *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, USA, 1952) and as recently as *December Bride* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Republic of Ireland/United Kingdom, 1990). One cannot but wonder whether a young Neil Jordan took part in – or simply observed – this local pursuit as a youth.

customers, pays for a shower and, having washed himself and masturbates before suddenly slitting his wrists with a rusty razor. This is certainly the most gruesome of the collection's stories, though it is not the most somber or surprising. But the placement of the story at the beginning of the collection sets the tone for the following tales as it immediately conflates sex, death and nostalgia for the windswept shoreline of home:

He watched the seed that had splattered the tiles be swept by the shower-water, diluting its grey, ultimately vanishing into the fury of current round the plug-hole. And he remembered the curving cement wall of his childhood and the spent tide and the rocks and the dried green stretches of sea-lettuce and because the exhaustion was delicious now and bleak, because he knew there would never be anything but that exhaustion after all the fury of effort, all the expense of passion and shame, he walked through the green-rose curtain and took the cut-throat razor from his pack and went back to the shower to cut his wrists. And dying, he thought of nothing more significant than the way, the way he had come here, of the green bridge and the bowed figure under the brick wall and the façade of the Victorian bath-house, thinking: there is nothing more significant (ibid 14).

The next story in the collection, "Seduction," moves away from the adult theme of "Last Rites" and into a setting that Jordan returns to more frequently than any other: coming-of-age on the Irish seaside. The story tells of two prepubescent boys exploring their hormonal aggression and simultaneous desire, curiosity and disgust of sex and sexuality. The story takes place during summer holidays at an unnamed Irish seaside

resort town, possibly Bray, which is a resort town several kilometers south of Dublin in County Wicklow and is the setting for many of Jordan's stories and the films *The Miracle* and the beginning of *The Crying Game*. There are strong echoes of "Seduction" in *The Miracle* (1991) and "Night in Tunisia." Both short stories and the film portray boys exploring the mystery, awe, fear and temptation of the voluptuous, older female body.¹⁷ Leanche ("Seduction"), Rita ("Night in Tunisia") and Renee Baker (Beverley D'Angelo, *The Miracle*) epitomize the mysterious, mature female body in the eyes of the pubescent boys in their respective stories. Though Rita is much younger than Leanche and Renee – she is still a few years older than the young protagonist in "Tunisia" and, importantly, she is also sexually knowledgeable – all three "women" possess curvy feminine bodies and attract the lusty stares of men and boys alike. They are all portrayed as "loose" women; though the consequences of this are most tragic for Rita, who is painfully young to be the object of sexual desire of the much older men she attracts.

"Sand," like its counterparts "Night in Tunisia" and "Seduction," features the confusion swirling around gender and sexuality in yet another unnamed seaside holiday town. The unnamed adolescent protagonist, in a moment of naïve misunderstanding and frustration, "sells" his sister to a teenaged tinker on the beach in exchange for a ride on his donkey. He regrets it immediately when he hears her scream down the beach and runs to her rescue, though in the end he retains his boyish anger: "He wanted to say sorry, but her eyes lay between him and his words. Then he did hate her. He hated her in a very basic way, he felt he would tear her apart, the way one tears the many wrappings of the

¹⁷ Jordan's second film, *The Company of Wolves* (1984), examines this curiosity in the hands of a *female* protagonist.

parcel in the pass-the-parcel game, to see what's inside" (ibid 24). Much like Jordan's other seaside stories, it is tempting to read the personal and autobiographical into "Sand".

Like "Tunisia," which will be discussed below, "Sand" is about mercurial adolescence and naiveté – especially where it concerns sexual awakening – confusion, embarrassment and outright anger. Each of the three stories is narrated from a young boy's perspective, and usually takes the form – as is the case with most of his writing – of the third-person. This narration offers omniscient insight, but only of the thoughts and experiences of a single character; this is true of the short stories discussed above and it is a tendency of Jordan's that carries over to his novels and films. It is the form that is best suited to his main interest: human stories and the portrayal of emotion and personal journeys.

"Mr Solomon Wept" is another of Jordan's short stories focused on adults. The title character is a man who tells anyone within earshot that his wife is dead, hoping to solicit pity from strangers in order to salve the pain of his wife having left him. The story is somewhat bitterly ironic, as Mr. Solomon lives in Laytown, the resort town, where happy, holidaying people constantly stroll past him. Contrasted with these cheerful vacationers, his life is feeble and ultimately worthless. The tale is particularly gloomy, and it ends with a brass band blaring loudly in the distance, scores of vacationers cheering, and Mr. Solomon weeping in the sand. Much like several of the later stories in this collection, "Mr Solomon Wept" documents the sting of pain, rejection, abandonment, and dysfunctional marriage, told in a stream of consciousness manner, but in third person narration. This is the story of a lonely man's dissatisfaction with a coldly cordial world, perhaps resembling the younger man's life in "Last Rites":

‘This one’s for my wife,’ he said. ‘I didn’t know you had one,’ said the barman, who was always courteous. ‘In memory of her. She died last year.’ ‘I’m sorry,’ said the barman. ‘Her anniversary?’ ‘Died on race day,’ began Mr Solomon but by this time the barman had headed off discreetly for a customer at the other end. He blinked once and then finished his drink and began to feel very angry at the courteous barman. [...] Mr Solomon shouted it, wept it, crowed with it, nobody listened, his thin face acquired a weasel look, a sorry look, his eyes grew more glazed and his speech more blurred, the reason for his grief grew hazy and indeterminate. By half-past four he was just drunk, all he knew was there was something somewhere to feel sorry over, profoundly sorry, somewhere a pain, though the reason for it he could no longer fathom, nor why it should be his pain particularly (ibid 30, 31).

Once again, the landscape of the seaside – but more specifically, that of a summer resort, figures strongly in Jordan’s narrative and indicates the great influence his childhood and adolescent summer vacations have had on his life. Jordan’s constant return to the Irish shoreline and his use of the contrast between a frenzied, cheery band with the more somber mood of his characters is part of the tone and imagery of his overall work: the imagery here of the seaside and a brass band wailing in the background will recur in *Angel* and, more powerfully, in *The Miracle*. It is also worth noting that the barman in this story bears considerable resemblance to Col (Jim Broadbent), the barkeep in *The Crying Game*, who courteously and amiably offers his ear to his customers, offering non-committal banter and enquiries and acts as a kind of coy conscience for the film itself,

querying mysteriously at the film's half-way point, "who knows the secrets of the human heart?"

Emotion and interiority are conveyed by Jordan equally well in writing and on screen, though his method is decidedly (and necessarily) different for each. On looking for a suitable method in cinema, as distinct from fiction writing, he has said:

I tend to write scripts as sparsely as possible, for two reasons. Firstly, the barer the language is the easier it is to concentrate on the essentials when directing what you've written. And those essentials I would define as what is seen, what happens, and what is said. Secondly, because elaborate visual, psychological, or visceral description tends to confuse those you have to work with – designers, cinematographers, and, most importantly, actors. The kind of sentence that may be appropriate in a novel or a short story would be not only inappropriate, it would be misleading (Jordan, 1993, xi.)

Jordan has already been quoted in the introduction as having difficulty grappling with the seemingly opposite languages employed in writing fiction and in filming it, but for a number of his literary pieces – particularly his earliest publications – and his films, a strong correlation exists between subject and imagery which suggests a progressing coherence in Jordan's oeuvre.

The influence of "Night in Tunisia" on Jordan's later work

Of Jordan's early published writing, "Night in Tunisia" has influenced his later writing and films most overtly. The short story is the fifth in the collection of ten, and is

also the longest, at seventeen pages. In terms of overall content, the story is similar to “Seduction” and “Sand;” it is the story of a fourteen year old boy who is holidaying on the Irish seaside with his father and sister for the summer. It contains some of Jordan’s most consistently recalled imagery and so will be given a longer analysis than the other stories in this collection. Already, we have seen how his preoccupation with the Irish seaside and its obvious nostalgic influence (“Last Rites”) permeates his writing. The setting is also crucial to his later accomplishments in filmmaking, and this will be explored in detail below.

The boy, who remains unnamed, is urged by his father, a musician, to practice the saxophone, insisting that his talent for it far exceeds his own and that, with practice, he could make something of himself. The father is at the seaside to play in a brass band to tourists and they stay for two months. The boy is fascinated by an older girl, Rita, who lives full-time in the town and infamously allows the seedy old men who vacation there to do with her what they please. The boy has only a vague understanding of this and, although fascinated by and drawn to Rita, guiltily engages in gossip and slander of her with another teenaged boy at the resort. He even steals money from his father with a bold plan to pay her for sex, until it is discovered that she has become suicidal, having twice been rescued from a shallow part of the water “too near the shore to drown in by accident” (ibid 48).

The notes of jazz music roll through the story: at one point Charlie Parker, a popular American jazz musician of the 1940s, is introduced on the radio, later influencing the boy to take up the saxophone – something his father unsuccessfully encouraged. Jordan himself is said to have started to play the saxophone upon hearing Charlie Parker

records in the mid 1970s (Rockett and Rockett 5). Parker's single "A Night in Tunisia," gives the story – and the entire collection of short stories – its name; it is also the song the protagonist hears on the radio (Jordan 1993, 46). The story's strong autobiographical undertones – knowledge of which, admittedly, Jordan's typical readers would not have access to – provide possibilities for understanding and interpreting his work as profoundly personal.

This is especially worth exploring with regard to the tenuous father-son relationship so often conveyed in Jordan's work. "Night in Tunisia" contains the first instance of that relationship in Jordan's work and it is given voice and depth that he also strives for with his films:

He would occasionally look and catch that look in his listening eyes, wry, sad and loving, his pleasure at how his son played only marred by the knowledge of how little it meant to him. And he would catch the look in his father's eyes and get annoyed and deliberately hit a bum note to spoil it. And the sadness in the eyes would outshine the wryness then and he would be sorry, but never sorry enough (ibid 37).

The human emotions evidenced in the above passage illustrates Jordan's ability to effortlessly convey the tense but undeniable bond between this father and son, and reflects the quality and tone of emotion that he strives for on the screen. One could suppose that this ability and interest in maintaining such a focus on the subject matter has something to do with his own relationship to his father; and his own experience as a son. In his writing, however, Jordan's descriptive power far outweighs the opportunities for

description available to him in film. This is also evidenced in the description of the boy's emotional turmoil and uncertainty with regard to Rita, the teenaged prostitute. Jordan is as adept in his writing at conveying deep emotion as he is in directing the performance of emotion in his films. Also important to Jordan's literature is the discovery of sexual intimacy and personal boundaries between young people, expressed particularly concisely in the following passage, where the boy watches Rita play tennis with a middle-aged man who she later leaves with:

His body worried, worrying the whole court. He felt there was something wrong, the obedient ball, the running man. What had she lost to gain that ease, he wondered. He thought of all the jokes he had heard and of the act behind the jokes that none of those who told the jokes experienced. The innuendos and the charged words like the notes his father played, like the melodies his father willed him to play. The rich full twang and the ball met her racquet at the centre (ibid 40).

This adolescent naiveté and uncertainty, especially where sexuality is concerned, expressed in his writing is certainly an important feature of Jordan's cinema as well (*The Company of Wolves*, *The Miracle*, *The Butcher Boy*). Between his writing and his films, Jordan manages to capture these experiences of youth, the everyday struggle with family, sexual experiences and the sudden, shocking experience of a loved one dying (in short, very human experiences) with considerable skill. His dreamlike cinematic imagery (discussed further in the following chapter) meets its match in his literary description and lyricism, particularly in "Night in Tunisia":

He played later on the piano in the clubhouse with the dud notes, all the songs, the trivial mythologies whose significance he had never questioned. It was as if he was fingering through his years and as he played he began to forget the melodies of all those goodbyes and heartaches, letting his fingers take him where they wanted to, trying to imitate that sound like a river he had just heard. It had got dark without him noticing and when finally he could just see the keys as question-marks in the dark, he stopped (ibid 43).

This passage from the short story echoes a similar scene in *Angel*. The film's main character, Danny (Stephen Rea), a musician touring throughout Ireland, plays to an empty room in an apparently abandoned building. He is so entranced by his solitary playing, and the eerie echo in the room that he is dreamily unaware of the passing of time and the spirits that pass before him. The scene in the movie is unclear to the audience; in one of the film's many unexplained scenes we are left to interpret this "magic" moment as uniquely interior – emotive of the character's haunting past, bottomless sorrow and desperate confusion – which is much like the young boy's emotional state in "Night in Tunisia," and both "scenes" possess a dreamlike quality and are eerily similar.

Aspects of the short story surface in several films – particularly where the exploration of forbidden love is central: *The Crying Game*, and *Breakfast on Pluto* as well as, more subtly, *The Company of Wolves*, *Interview with the Vampire* and *The End of the Affair* – although the story has most distinctly influenced two of Jordan's early films. As in "Night in Tunisia," Jordan's first film, *Angel* (1982), relies heavily on Jordan's preoccupation with the solitary male musician playing jazz tunes that become

mournful and contemplative with each successive rendition. The film, often referred to as Jordan's European art film, takes place in part in the seaside town of Bray and also features a tender, though short-lived love affair between Danny (Stephen Rea) and a deaf-mute girl, Annie (Veronica Quilligan), whose youth and disability render Danny's sexual foray with her somewhat taboo. This conflation of the Irish seaside, forbidden sex, death and the saxophone musician (or more generally, the brass band and jazz music), are among *Angel's* strongest links with "Night in Tunisia." These same aspects also figure in *The Miracle* (1991), which has the strongest resonance with what is one of Jordan's first short stories. The film tells the story of Jimmy (Niall Byrne), a teenaged boy who lives year-round in an Irish resort town with his middle-aged father, Sam (Donal McCann). Like Mr. Solomon ("Mr Solomon Wept"), Sam is a particularly depressing character who tells his son that his mother, Rene, is dead though, in truth, she has left them. Jimmy and his best friend, Rose (Lorraine Pilkington) wander around town teasing tourists and fantasizing about the love affairs they imagine passers-by to be entangled in. Jimmy's father, a musician in a brass band, urges his skeptical son to use his considerable talent – he plays saxophone and piano – and follow in his footsteps. When a glamorous older woman arrives in town, Jimmy is smitten and, even after discovering that she is his mother, a stage actor returned to Ireland from America to perform in a play, he continues to pursue her and the two, it is implied, make love.

Like Rita in "Night in Tunisia," Renee is the mysterious older woman admired from afar. Both narratives take place at Irish resort towns in the summer and feature teenaged boys whose fathers encourage them to develop their skills as jazz musicians. The correlation between the two is unmistakable and the themes developed in both can

also be found in some of Jordan's later work. The mysterious Rene, the main character in *The Past*, is the double of Beverly D'Angelo's character, Renée in *The Miracle*. Like the film's character, Rene in *The Past* is a stage actor who finds herself the object of desire of a younger man and his much older father. This topic of forbidden love and the love triangle features yet again in Jordan's two subsequent novels, *Sunrise with Sea Monster* and *Shade*. These relationships will be discussed later. It is important to note, however, that the relationships, themes and imagery – particularly the Irish seaside – return throughout Jordan's work and evolve from these first short stories to novel and to film.

Throughout both *The Miracle* and "Night in Tunisia", there is an emphasis on the father-son relationship and the lack of communication within this bond. Both stories contain the performance of jazz music, forbidden love, teenage rebellion and the backdrop of the Irish seaside resort. The collection's second half, however, contains an entirely different imagery and set of preoccupations than the adolescent concerns of "Night in Tunisia," "Seduction" and "Sand". Although the Irish landscape still permeates the backdrop of these stories, it is not the Irish shoreline of the youthful summer stories that have so far been told. These five tales all contain adult themes, particularly broken or unhappy marriage, mental and physical illness, religious questioning and spiritual awakening. The overall tone of the collection's second half tends to be quite bleak, though contemplative, in keeping with "Last Rites" and "Mr Solomon Wept."

"Skin" is the compelling short story of a middle-aged Irish housewife whose boredom with everyday life and a "desperate need for open spaces" (ibid 54) cause several guilty fantasies and fearful hallucinations. Although she appears to live in mid-twentieth century Dublin, she nonetheless feels isolated from the outside world in her

quiet home. The desire for any spark of adventure in her monotonous life causes her to indulge in a series of increasingly strange and intense – although brief – hallucinations which seem to leave her in a progressively unstable mental state. These visions are “a frightening admixture of religious passion and guilt, bordering on a kind of painful ecstasy; the need, the capacity for religiously intense experience of living; and in consequence of the lack of this, a deep residue of guilt” (ibid 52-3). The narration is omniscient and third-person, and the result is a stream-of-conscious (or stream-of-conscience) chronology of her descent into despairing suicidal thoughts, religious guilt, desperation for passion and fear of the unknown. “Skin” is also the first story in Jordan’s oeuvre told from the perspective of a woman. As she is silently preparing a stew in her empty home one day, the unnamed woman has a series of conflicting visions; her own bloodied hands as she imagines cutting herself with a knife, an awareness of her wedding band cutting into her skin as she scrubs at her hands to remove the smell of onion, a daydream of a secret life, a fantasy about driving to the country to offer herself to men (an activity she finds particularly titillating after reading about it in an article on Swedish housewives in a magazine, though she is surprised and anxious, even disgusted that it should attract her), and the sudden feeling that she is a bird in flight as she breaks with her routine and sets out on the country road towards Howth.¹⁸ The visions intensify as the woman gets farther from her doorstep: she imagines herself “as a bloodied doll, hanging through a sharded [sic] windscreen” before arriving at an unseasonably deserted late-summer beach (ibid 54).

¹⁸ Howth is yet another seaside locale; a small town and residential suburb on a peninsula just fifteen kilometers outside of Dublin. It was, in the early nineteenth century, the main Dublin harbour and, more recently, is renowned for being the port into which Robert Erskine Childers smuggled rifles in 1914 to arm the Irish Volunteers in advance of the 1916 Easter Rising.

The woman's most gripping vision, given the violent and lascivious ones she also entertains, occurs just before she leaves home: she is cast in a haloed glow like the Virgin Mary as she is represented in classical art and, more tellingly, by the ubiquitous mass-produced plaster statuettes throughout the Catholic world (and particularly Ireland):

The midday sun came streaming in the large window from behind her. She saw it as a confluence of rays emanating from her. [...] the image of the Virgin crossed her silent vacant eyes. She had raised her hand to her hair and saw the light break through her fingers. She thought of the statue in the hall; plastic hands with five plastic sunrays affixed to each; streaming towards the feet, the snake, the water-bowl. Mother of Christ (ibid 51).

This vision contrasts sharply with the rest of the story and integrates Catholic imagery subversively: the correlation between the “uneventful [...and] plain” countenance of the average Irish housewife, with her “silent vacant eyes” and the Mother of God, as she is represented in countless plaster moulds, is particularly powerful. Another unusual comparison with religious imagery occurs near the story's end, as the woman edges her way into the churning sea: “Each wave seemed to rise like a solid thing, laced with white foam, subsiding into paltriness just when she felt it would engulf her. Swelling, foaming, then retreating. [...] She felt the spray on her cheek. Wet, ice-cold, the feel of church floors, green altar, rails” (ibid 55). Yet it is the vision of the kitschy embodiment of Mother Mary that stands out here. It is a particular manifestation of both religious piety and Irish femininity that will surface again throughout Jordan's work. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford has identified the significance of these images of the Virgin in Irish film and literature:

the linkage between Catholicism and the nation is demonstrated by the fact that [...] “Mother Ireland” is [...] most often visually embodied in the figure of the Mother of God, as reproduced in countless prints, holy pictures, and statues. To those who venerate this figure for what it means rather than how it looks, the icon is beyond aesthetic criticism. It points beyond itself to heaven. To those unconstrained by belief of reverence, the plaster virgin is the epitome of religious kitsch: she is the most familiar of the standardized, mass-produced and widely-disseminated devotional objects that dominate both public and domestic spaces in Ireland (ibid 187).

The Virgin in Jordan’s short story seems to be somewhere between veneration and ridicule. Jordan is a lapsed Catholic, but the imagery and symbolism associated with it still clearly hold mystery and weight for him. The influence of Catholic piety clearly permeates the woman’s life and her fantasies are matched by her “frightening admixture of religious passion and guilt.” This struggle with Catholic piety is a theme to which Jordan frequently returns.

As the woman in “Skin” wades deeper into the sea, all similarity between the frigid, steely church ebbs and the woman experiences something akin to sexual arousal and a loss of the virginity which she imagined had emanated from her only pages before. Sea foam surrounds her “like a bridal wreath” and the tide “surged up wetting her belly and thighs, taking her breath away” and “tickling her groin” (ibid 56). Upon seeing a man on the shore who has clearly been looking at her, she briefly panics, thinking of him staring salaciously at the curve of her body and dampened skirt hitched above her hips.

Almost immediately, though, she is swept up by fantasy again: “there was this pounding, pounding through her body, saying: this is it. This is what the sea means, what it all must mean” (ibid 56). The man walks off and she finds her self disappointedly trudging back ashore, where the story ends.

The portrait of the dissatisfied Irish housewife finding freedom and even sexual excitement in the undulating Irish sea – however briefly – is suggestive indeed. When juxtaposed to themes of sexual arousal, marital infidelity and violent death, Jordan’s use of the natural landscape and symbolism of the Catholic Church – particularly the image of the Virgin Mary (both in the woman’s imagination and, more generally, in the hackneyed manifestation of the standard-issue plaster statuettes) – combine to produce one of his most provocative short stories. The setting of the woman’s sexual/spiritual awakening is at the beach at Howth and her various fantasies of herself as the Virgin in the kitchen, the harlot in the ocean, the trapped wife and the bird in flight combine to unstitch the pillars of traditional Irish imagery – the landscape, the mother and the Virgin.

The next three stories in the collection are similar in tone and content to “Skin.” “Her Soul,” “Outpatient,” and “Tree” centre on adult lives and broken and unhappy marriages. “Her Soul,” starts from the point of a “broken” marriage – a man whose wife has died (or left him, possibly) – and continues to describe his encounter with a younger woman on the stairwell at a party. The story is told from the woman’s perspective as she wards off his advances and, much like the housewife in “Skin,” entertains a fantasy of escape, imagining her body slipping into the shadows on the stairs and walls. She wonders where her own soul is or whether it is lost, after the man tells her he feels he lost his upon his wife’s death. When the man offers her a sip of his drink, she considers

crushing the glass in her hand to feel “real pain,” which, she thinks, might bring her soul rushing back to her. Instead, she takes a sip of his whiskey and continues to stand on the stairs with him, “wondering what to say” (ibid 58). Much like the solitary characters in “Mr Solomon Wept” and “Skin,” the woman in this story is nearly paralysed by a feeling of feebleness and finds it impossible to say what she means or make herself understood. Her contemplation on the state of and whereabouts of her soul, as she stands drunkenly on the steps, vaguely hints at the Catholic guilt which is so obviously felt by the woman in “Skin.” Like her, the woman on the steps finds herself unsure whether to accept the advances of a strange man and both stories end ambiguously, with neither character asserting herself in the end.

“Outpatient” is another story of a woman’s stifled life and seems to be a prequel to “Skin” – the story of how that housewife came to live in a house she hates with a man she cannot communicate with and how she learns to fantasize to compensate for her dull workaday life. For the first paragraph “Outpatient” is told from the husband’s perspective, but then switches to the woman’s point of view for the remainder of the story’s scant five pages. The unnamed woman returns home to Dublin from County Clare, in the west of Ireland, after recovering from a nervous breakdown. She is overcome with fascination about miracles ever since visiting St. Brigit’s Well, which is in Liscannor near the cliffs of Moher in County Clare. Brigit is one of Ireland’s most cherished saints, whose life is clouded in mystery and myth.¹⁹ It is at the well that the female protagonist sees a pilgrimage and a cluster of crutches left by the cured. As she rapturously tells her husband of the pilgrims, he reacts coldly and tries to distract her from her unusual fascination:

¹⁹ Also known as St. Brigid and sometimes confused with Brigid, the Celtic goddess.

Do you believe they were cured? Perhaps, he said, they were never really crippled, or the cure was psychosomatic. But miraculously, she asked, not miraculously? And the word sounded like a peal of trumpets in her ears, she saw the biblical walls tumbling. He didn't answer, he looked at her quickly once, and then took her by both shoulders and stood back from her, as if complimenting her on something. It did you good, he said, and it will be better this time. Won't it? [...] They were standing facing one another, neither looking. Mentally she took several steps backwards. [...] If she had seen it as an extract from a film she would have known it to be the last-but-one scene of some domestic tragedy (ibid 60).

The couple is about to buy a house in Dublin's northern suburbs. It is a plain, square house and the woman is suddenly overwhelmed by fear of its normalcy and her husband's refusal to respond to her bouts of whimsy and wonder. While her husband makes unsatisfying love to her, she imagines she is underneath the dome of a huge bell, the tongue of which is about to knock her down. She dreams of a carcass swinging above them from meat hooks as they make love but which her husband refuses to acknowledge. In the end, it is implied that the woman remains silent about her dis-ease and dissatisfaction, wanting to talk more about miracles but anticipating her husband's cool response.

This trilogy of trapped, unhappy women – “Skin,” “Her Soul” and “Outpatient” is followed by another story with a female protagonist. “Tree” seems especially linked in tone and subject to “Skin” and “Outpatient”. A husband and wife have been driving through the western Irish countryside for a week, evidently on a tour of rural history and

mythology, although the woman is bored by her husband's exhaustive chronicling. As they drive along the limestone landscape, the woman spots a lone tree with white blooms in the distance, although it is impossible for trees to grow in such conditions. "The thought that it was impossible made her warm, with a childish warm delight. She felt the hairs rising on her legs" (ibid 65). Thrilled by the possibility of an extraordinary insertion into their boring tour and sensing the miraculous much like the woman in "Outpatient," she speeds up to get a better look, although her blandly reasonable husband protests. The couple stops at a pub where the husband drinks beer and mechanically orders a tonic for his wife, though she dislikes tonic and remembers a time when she drank whiskey. Later, in the car, she declares that she is leaving him, although it is unclear by the end whether she will do so. The "blooming" tree turns out to have been a prayer tree, with bits of prayers and thanks-giving written on scraps of paper and tied to the leafless branches. The story ends suddenly, as the woman reads the crumbling messages to Brigid.²⁰

Together with the three stories before it, the portrait being developed of Irish women is a realistic – if bleak – portrayal of the dissatisfaction and restlessness of Jordan's female characters. Their states of mental anguish, frustration and curiosity of the divine (and their connections to the landscape) reveal an Irish woman far removed from the emblem of Irish nationalism, "Mother Ireland," so often summoned in Revival literature.²¹ Though Jordan refers to the Irish landscape with obvious affection and reverence – the conflation of the natural landscape, local myth and Catholic faith, particularly – this is not the rejuvenating landscape so sentimentally invoked in Revival

²⁰ Though the spelling differs from "Outpatient," it is likely that is referring to St. Brigid (also known as St. Brigit) and not the Celtic goddess, Brigid.

²¹ For instance, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the mythic figure most famously manifested in Yeats' play of the same name (*Cathleen ni Houlihan*, 1902). She is usually personified as an old woman who needs the help of young Irish men to fight for their country's freedom.

literature or nationalist politics. His use of the land as the setting for these stories of stifled and unhappy women is revealing and will be continued throughout his later work, as the next chapters show.

The last story in the collection, “A Love,” contains many of the already recognizably Jordanian images and symbols: the brass band, Dublin (the city by the sea) and the Irish countryside, the strained relationship of father and son, antiquated faith and a boy’s love of an older woman. It also introduces three important aspects of Jordan’s work not present in the rest of the collection: the romantic trinity, the author’s relationship to twentieth century Irish politics and the significance and influence of photographs on personal and collective memory. More importantly, the story seems to be one of Jordan’s most autobiographical (he even names the main character after himself): it speaks directly to his feelings about his country.

The story begins in Dublin, during Eamon de Valera’s funeral procession in 1975.

²²A young man, Neil, meets an older woman he hasn’t seen for years at a café upon hearing that she has been ill – over the course of their meeting, the history of their relationship is revealed. When she was thirty-nine, the woman had been a love interest for Neil’s widowed father, although she eventually became involved with Neil as a fifteen-year-old “Irish boy with greased hair and collarless leather jacket (ibid 72). It is the brass band and weeping mourners – the pomp and circumstance of de Valera’s funeral – which bring these memories flooding back to the protagonist. Though once lovers, they are of two generations and thus have “two different memories of him” (ibid

²² De Valera was one of Ireland’s most influential politicians of the twentieth century. He led the anti-peace treaty camp against fellow politician and Irish revolutionary leader, Michael Collins. De Valera is the author of Ireland’s constitution, served as Prime Minister almost continuously from 1937 to 1959 and as Ireland’s president from 1959 to 1973, two years before his death.

70). Neil remembers how his relationship with the woman began after he discovered an Irish Civil War rifle in her house and broke two panes of glass in her greenhouse with it. She took the gun – still smoking, we might presume – out of his hands and they made love by the sea.

As the protagonist sits in the café, his memories of his affair and of his idea of who de Valera was come rushing back to him:

Then I remembered something else about him, the man who died, he had been the centre of the school textbooks, his angular face and his thirties collar and his fist raised in a gesture of defiance towards something out there, beyond the rim of the brown photograph, never defined” (ibid 71, see Figure 1).

Neil feels strangely detached from Dublin’s procession and, in fact, from Ireland itself. He has recently returned from living in London – as Jordan had, in 1973 – and realizes that his relationship to “home” has fundamentally changed, perhaps even before he left the island; perhaps the change is what prompted him to leave. He later calls the procession “like watching an animal dying [...], an animal that was huge, murderous, contradictory” (ibid 75). This is clearly a critical commentary on de Valera’s government, particularly in its role of defining the Free State and imposing decades of isolationist and conservative policies upon the country. Jordan’s portrait of de Valera will be expanded in subsequent works, particularly *The Past* and *Michael Collins*; both are discussed below.



Figure 1: Eamon de Valera circa 1930

Neil and the woman set off for Lisdoonvarna in County Clare, a setting which will become an important backdrop for Jordan's first novel and will be discussed in the next chapter. We get a sense of their journey west – through counties Dublin, Wicklow, Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary, and Limerick – based on Jordan's description of the landscape and landmarks. On their way, he considers how his relationship to and perception of the woman has changed over time: "Once it was with desire I filled you out with, not memory. You were a blown-up photograph to me, a still from a film [...] you played Ava Gardner to my James Dean" (ibid 76). On their way, they talk about de Valera – but more specifically of the pictures that personified him to the nation. She remembers him as looking like a schoolteacher, although "you could never see his eyes clearly because of his glasses" (ibid 77). She goes on to say that you cannot understand Ireland without going west, after Neil admits that he's never been. It is here, on the trip west, that Neil remembers his relationship with his father, a math teacher, as being tense

and marked by Neil's jealousy and anger, these emotions culminating in the boy's feeble attempt to murder, or at least frighten, his father one night by firing the woman's civil war rifle at his father from behind a bathroom door. The use of such a historical relic in this "assassination" attempt draws our attention the Irish Civil War in which opposing factions of Irishmen argued bloodily over a peace treaty with Britain, conflating the political with the personal. No doubt some correlation between Neil's strict father and the reserved and distant de Valera, the political patriarch of the nation for much of the twentieth century, is being drawn here. Neil's father had been in love with the woman and took her and his young son to a variety show in Bray where they later have dinner and later at the Great Northern Hotel in Donegal where he tried to woo the woman, unaware of his son's affair with her. This plot point is mirrored years later in *Sunrise with Sea Monster* and *Michael Collins* and will be discussed in chapter three.

Half-way on their trip, they stop at a pub. Neil orders gin, the woman, stout. "The barman remarked on how it's normally the other way around," drawing attention to the fact that love affairs between generations are usually the other way around, as well: an older man and a younger woman. The slight subversion of gender roles here foreshadows Jordan's later work in which the adolescent boy frequently falls in love with an older woman, particularly in his writing.

In Lisdoonvarna, the woman takes sulphur waters as she is ill. Jordan describes this as an "act of faith in water" (ibid 84). His description recalls the deeply faithful acts witnessed by the women in "Tree" and "Outpatient." The prayer tree, the pilgrimage to St. Brigit's Well and the drinking of the sulphur waters in Clare in these respective stories not only links faith with the actual landscape and earth of Ireland, but, importantly, also

links these acts of faith (or the desire for faith and miracles) exclusively with *women*. This looks forward to Jordan's subsequent work in literature and especially to *The End of the Affair*.

While Jordan's own creative writing seems most overtly reflected in his earlier films, as opposed to his later works which increasingly take the form of adaptations of other author's novels (*Interview with the Vampire*, *The Butcher Boy*, *End of the Affair*), his seeming fascination with budding love, pubescence and family dynamics continues to influence his choice of source material. Throughout Jordan's film oeuvre, there is a consistent return to and focus upon these human conundrums and experiences. This same devotion to the interior in his fiction work – the deepest thoughts and emotions of characters – is especially present in Jordan's next work of fiction writing, published just before his directorial debut. Together, the collection of short stories and the novel, although diverse in terms of form and focus, evince a developing style that would soon manifest itself on the screen for the first time.

CHAPTER TWO: *The Past*: a foundation

"Everything turns to everything else." (The Past, 299)

The Past, first published in 1980, is Jordan's first novel. Drawing as it does on themes of familial relationships, coming-of-age and an almost obsessive need to discover and document the past, the book is a brilliant, contemplative meditation on human emotion, experience, and the urge to know one's origins. It is also very clearly a development of some of some of the premises present in *Night in Tunisia and Other Stories*.

Briefly, the fictional novel details the birth, girlhood, maturity and pregnancy of Rene, a woman born in 1914 to Michael and Una O'Shaughnessy and who grows up in Dublin and Bray. After her father is killed in the Irish Civil War, her mother, an actor and very public Republican widow, brings Rene up in and around Dublin's Abbey Theatre; and she grows up to join a theatre troupe and tour the myth-laden West of Ireland, which is where the novel ends. As a young woman, Rene's life intersects with the Vance family – a land-owning Protestant family in Bray whose fortune is in a state of decline – about mid-way through the novel. The Vance family consists of a son (Luke), a father (James) and James' father (known simply as Old Vance or even "old man").

The novel is narrated by Rene's grown child – a product of the pregnancy detailed in the book. This man – for we assume he is a man – is seeking answers about his mother's life up to the point he was born. Rene's childhood friend, Lily, facilitates the narrator's search for the details of his mother's young life, providing him with several photographs of Rene and other characters close to her; these images are his only link to his own family history. David Quammen aptly states in a review for the *New York Times*

in 1981: “‘The Past’ reads, as it is intended to read, like an obsessive, tender annotation to a heartbreakingly thin family photograph album.”

Throughout the novel, the reader is given few orienting clues or historical contextualization. It is unclear exactly what role Rene’s father has in the burgeoning Free State, although it is clear that he is a Republican leader who was assassinated during the Irish Civil War (his character’s life vaguely resembles the life of Michael Collins).²³ Although Rene’s childhood is chronicled with much detail, we have very little understanding of who she is as a young woman, limited as we are to what the narrator can gather from a few worn photographs and the time-weathered ramblings of an elderly Lily. This reliance on photographs as a substitute for memory is also a part of “A Love,” when the protagonist wonders how his memory of de Valera – who had just died – differs from that of the woman he once had an affair with, who is a generation older than him: “It was a stupid pursuit since I had no memory of him other than from photographs and then only a big nose and bulging eyes and spectacles but I knew you would be changed and I knew I was changed and I wanted to stop thinking about it” (Jordan 2005, 70). Jordan, who was twenty-five when de Valera died, would have shared this gap in memory with the protagonist: he would have relied on pictures of the national figurehead all of his life, having never been alive whilst de Valera was in a position of political power.²⁴ He later

²³ O’Shaughnessy is described by Lily in the book’s first chapter thus: “He was from a Redmondite family, a lawyer with that blend of innocence and relentless idealism that was admirable then, really admirable, and that took to Free State to sully it. He was the best of them, by far the best of them, he was marked out for what would happen to him later, I’ve heard that said, having no way of knowing, my only memories of him are in the kindergarten school out near Mount Merrion, he’d come to visit us in his Free State uniform, the darling of the nuns with those glazed eyes that told you precisely how much he hated it, the heavy ridiculous belts and the shoulder pistols, he must have hated it even more than de Valera hated him, we would walk through the classroom in his wide boots, stammer while refusing the nuns’ offer of tea and lift Rene on to his hip.” (7)

²⁴ De Valera became Ireland’s third president (a title with no political power behind it) in 1959, when Jordan was nine years old, and held his position until 1973.

describes his meeting of the woman he had an affair with years before as a process of remembering: “As I remember you, I choose bits of you and like a child with a colouring-book, I fill you out” (ibid 76). This could well describe the narrator’s chosen task in *The Past*, as photographs and the memories of an old woman help to etch out the truth of Rene’s long-forgotten life.

It is implied that Rene dies while giving birth, since the description of her life ends abruptly near the end of her pregnancy, in the novel’s last chapter (ibid 287). This would account for the narrator’s apparent lack of knowledge about his mother’s life, thus providing him with possible motivation for uncovering the complex tapestry of scandal, family, friendship, sexual awakening, politics and Catholic upbringing which informed Rene’s life. Significantly, these are also the themes that Jordan will continue to tease out – in fiction and in film – for the next two decades. The narrator is also trying to figure out who his father is – either James or his son Luke – by tracing Rene’s history with the Vance family.

At first, the narrator addresses Rene directly, using the second person. As the novel progresses, however, and the narrator’s search is enriched by Lily’s version of things and the photographers he studies with acute concentration, his thoughts about Rene are written in the third person. It gradually becomes clear that by uncovering this mysterious figure of his past – his mother, significantly – the narrator seeks to understand himself as well. Indeed, Jordan returns to the search for self – especially through memory and conflict with parental figures (usually fathers), in much of his work, including “Night in Tunisia” and “Seduction”, his other two novels *Sunrise with Sea Monster* and *Shade*, as well as *The Company of Wolves*, *The Miracle*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *The*

Butcher Boy and most recently, and perhaps most provocatively, *Breakfast on Pluto*. This depiction of parenthood and particularly father/son relationships will be returned to below.

The Past is written in six segments, chronologically detailing Rene's life from her birth (the first section "Cornwall, 1914") to the impending birth of her child (the sixth section, "Lisdoonvarna" in 1934). From the third section ("Bray, 1922") onward, the narrator's voice shifts as he moves from direct address to Rene as a child, to the description of the life of James Vance, a Protestant photographer. Jordan's narrator briefly addresses James in the second person. Together, Rene and James are the only people the narrator directly addresses and this itself might be a subtle clue to the narrator's beliefs of his parentage. Several times in the book, when Rene's pregnancy is being described, the implication is that one of the Vance men has impregnated her – either Luke, who is twenty four; or James, who is much older than Rene's 19 or 20 years – although the father of the child is never explicitly named. Since the second person is the device used exclusively for these two characters, we are encouraged to draw a link between them, and there is certainly an implication that the narrator is addressing first his mother, as a child, and later his *father*, James, as a middle-aged man.

The shift in voice occurs quite suddenly, though subtly, in the novel's eighteenth chapter, halfway through the third section. In fact the introduction to the Vance family occurs quite suddenly in the novel at this not quite midway point. It resembles the opening of the novel itself in that another set of characters – in this case the Vance family and Father Beausang – are introduced without forewarning, just as the book begins with Michael, Una and Rene. This section begins with direct address to Rene and third person

observation of James: “So when *James Vance* entered the Abbey Green Room what would *your* [Rene’s] sense of him have been?” (ibid 106, my emphasis). Over the next few chapters, however, the narrator’s voice shifts from direct address to third person description of Rene and then, in the first half of chapter eighteen, James is addressed in the second person (while he is described elsewhere in the third person). Significantly, the narrator’s short-lived direct address to James seems to be prompted by the narrator’s description of an old picture of James and Father Beausang. The book itself begins with the description of an old postcard sent from Cornwall by the narrator’s grandmother, who had just given birth to Rene. We could postulate that it is these photographs – the only relics he has of this forgotten time, often images of Rene taken by James himself, and which the narrator encounters and describes throughout the book – provide a catalyst for the narrator to approach these figures from his past more directly, posing his questions to them straightforwardly, as if trying to make conversation with ghosts.

James, being a Protestant who married a Catholic (long since dead), is under some local scrutiny for not raising Luke as a Catholic, which is by far the major religion in the Republic of Ireland. Father Beausang visits the Vance family frequently to timidly suggest James raise Luke as a Catholic, but a friendship between the two men soon develops and it is the description of a photograph of the two men that seems to provoke the narrator to suddenly address James directly. When the chapter begins, James is referred to in the third person. But merely one page later, he is addressed directly: “Your arm is around [Father Beausang’s] shoulder in that snap, the open door of your house frames you, both of your chests puffed out, endlessly amused because both of you, photographers, were photographing each other” (ibid 116).

This curious shift in the narration's focus begins with the narrator describing a photograph, but quickly evolves into the distinct manner in which the narrator describes events and character conversations that he could not have been privy to:

You tell Luke to bring in tea and sandwiches. Father Beausang touches your elbow and holds up the book. You read the title and smile. *Arithmetic and Mensuration* by Eamon de Valera. [...Father Beausang] tells you his theories [...] You feel quite sad, listening, anticipating his inevitable return. [...] He has as yet read only accounts of these theories, has gulped them down whole in his excitement, but his sense of discovery is so real that it excites you, unwillingly, in turn (ibid 118-119).²⁵

Here we are given access to James' private thoughts, although it is impossible for the narrator to know them. This unusual narration is also present to record the thoughts of Rene as a young girl – though not as a young woman – as well as Michael and Una in the book's first few chapters. Together, these are the narrator's father and mother and maternal grandparents. In his search for his past, he has pieced together what information he can and has begun to *construct* a family history including the detailed interior thoughts of these characters. Significantly, he uses photographs to structure his search, most of them taken by James Vance, whose profession as a photographer springs not from financial need but from a fascination for the art form. The narrator boldly describes him at the beginning of the book's third section, and credits the fact that, without his photographs, his search would be significantly diminished: "It is the spirit of that photographer which impels this book. James Vance, his passion for documentation, for

²⁵ Like Jordan's father, de Valera was also a mathematician and a school teacher, before becoming a politician. As mentioned in the analysis of "A Love" in the previous chapter, there seems to be some correlation between de Valera and the often tense father-son relationships developed within Jordan's work.

capturing in a frame the shades of experience” (ibid 91). Here, the narrator is self-consciously referencing his book and, by extension, Jordan is bringing attention to the book he has written. It could also be said that James Vance’s role of capturing “shades of experience” within a frame is Jordan’s task as well.

Landscape and Memory

Throughout the novel, the narrator moves closer and closer to understanding his family’s history. Through conversations with Lily and Father Beausang and by piecing together what he can based on the photographs and historical record (traces of the Rene’s theatre troupe; knowledge of de Valera’s tour through the west of Ireland), he is able to weave something of a portrait of his mother – and along the way, his father as well – in order to fill the gaps of his personal history. Both the narrator’s journey through the past as he traces the footsteps of his dead mother, and Rene’s own tour with the theatre troupe through the west of the country culminate by the novel’s end. The narrator is literally traveling with Lily to the spot of his birth in Lisdoonvarna, County Clare (also the site of the sulphur springs in “A Love” and visited by de Valera in *The Past* – a kind of triple reference); at the same time, he is obsessively re-tracing Rene’s path in 1934. Here, at the end of the novel, the memory of the past and the narrator’s journey merge: both narrator and Rene end up in Lisdoonvarna in late summer, but decades apart: the past and the present are reconciled. As the narrator takes the train to Lisdoonvarna, he reflects on how the railway line connects the land in profound and overlapping ways: “So the Great Southern line followed the contours of a landscape which set the pattern of ages and the movements of people who were followed by MacAllister [the troupe’s manager] who was

followed by Rene who was followed by James and is followed by me. De Valera sped behind them in a car, towards his election posters” (ibid 277). Here in Ireland, the landscape and politics, history, memory and family converge, quite literally, in the journey west.

In a journey similar to the narrator’s, James chases after the theatre troupe, hoping to find Rene as they tour through western towns towards the end of the novel. Through searching, his journey leads him through the history-laden landscape, from northwest beaches of Sligo, down to the limestone hills of Clare:

In one square there is a Civil War statue with a stone cap staring beyond the roofs of houses. In another lies a cement road crumbling into beach and burrows. [...] He swims at each beach he comes to [...] The wave that hits his body at each new beach seems a cousin of the last one. [...] The rock comes to flood the landscape, pushing the grass. [...] A vat of milk spills and floods a broad street. He walks through it past a church entrance where the milk laps the feet of the Virgin’s statue. They multiply themselves as he travels southwards and all roads and all roads lead to hallowed places, while seeming to lead just to other roads. He searches them out in turn, the trees copper with hammered pennies, [...] the cloths that simulate blossoms on the blackthorn branches. (ibid 270-1).

This last image is straight out of Jordan’s short story, “Tree,” examined in the previous chapter, in which a prayer tree appears as a tree in full, impossible white bloom from a distant road in late summer. James journey, like the narrator’s, also encourages him to remember the past, which he does as he reflects the (parallel) maturity of his son and of

Rene, who he has known from the age of seven. He pictures their progression into young adulthood as a series of his photographs of them, “a moving picture of their souls” (ibid 267). As Jordan describes James’ journey, he weaves together feminine and Catholic imagery with the Irish landscape and cinematic imagery.

As is already obvious in the many resort settings and lonely beaches within Jordan’s short story compilation discussed in the previous chapter, the sea holds particularly profound significance in Jordan’s fiction writing, and to a lesser extent his films, especially *Angel*, *The Miracle*, *The Crying Game* and *The Butcher Boy*. In *The Past*, this fascination with and reverence for the ocean is revealed in the theatre troupe’s tour of Ireland’s west:

Lily [...] would know while they would lose sight of that sea repeatedly through the rest of that summer, that sea would be their only plumb-line. It would be to them the way it is to a car, along a rocky coastline, where it disappears out of sight, is forgotten for long stretches and is welcomed on reappearance, like an old friend or an ultimate purpose. [...] Lily, though, doesn’t admit or recognize the importance of beaches, but looking at her in those breaks between her talking, I can see the memory of that series of beaches written on her face, on the threads of tiny veins across her cheeks, for all the world like the criss-cross of currents on an expanse of water seen from above (ibid 263-4).

In Ireland, where you are never farther than, perhaps, sixty kilometers from the ocean, it seems natural that Jordan should be so drawn to its imagery. But it is in the comparison

of Ireland's oceans and beaches and the skin and face of a woman that Jordan's particular expression of the sea is so profound.

Love triangles

Aside from the conflation of photography and Irish landscape with memory, *The Past* contains several thematic elements that carry over from Jordan's short stories and will continue through subsequent work. Chief among these are the love triangle, links between femininity and performance, the use of Irish politics and landscape (especially the sea and countryside) as backdrop, and the influence of Catholicism on the country's people (these will be discussed further below). The love triangle that forms between Rene and the Vance father and son, which strongly resembles the father-son-lover trio already etched out in the short story, "A Love" will return as a feature of *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, *The Miracle* and *Michael Collins*. In the former three works, the love triangle develops between father, son and a young woman. Desire for a young woman develops between father and son and, and in the novels, the woman returns the affections of both men (ultimately Rose actually marries the father in *Sunrise*). The woman in "A Love," by contrast, returns only the attention of the much younger son. *The Miracle* and *Michael Collins* offer distinct versions of this trinity of characters. In *The Miracle*, the lusted-after woman is a middle-aged and a stage actor. Curiously, she is also named Renee, perhaps in reference to Rene O'Shaughnessy in *The Past*, who is also a stage actor and desired by both a father and his son. In a twist in this already peculiar Jordanian romantic trinity, Renee (Beverly D'Angelo) turns out to be the estranged wife of the father (Sam, played by noted Irish actor Donal McCann) and thus the mother of Jimmy (Niall Byrne), who is

infatuated with her. Particularly in “A Love,” *The Past* and *The Miracle*, the broken Irish family (these father-son households lack a mother, whether through death or abandonment) seek to correct this lack of mother/lover and fall into Oedipal infatuations with the same woman (this recurs in *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, discussed in the next chapter). Only in *The Past* does Jordan overtly comment on this unusual union: “Each through loving each other loves the other, father, son and her” (ibid 283). This reads as a clue to understanding the father-son-lover relationships that will follow in *The Miracle* and *Sunrise with Sea Monster*. In this way, *The Past* can be considered a foundational text upon which Jordan will build subsequent stories out of.

These idiosyncratic three-way relationships are perhaps the strongest link between Jordan’s writing and filmmaking. In several films – especially *Interview with the Vampire*, *The Butcher Boy*, *The End of the Affair* and *Breakfast on Pluto* – there is a subtle play between references to the holy trinity in his strange culmination of characters. In *The Past*, Father Beausang comments on the pervasive influence of trinities, both within the Catholic Church and, importantly, within everyday human relationships as well:

Father Beausang’s eyes light with enthusiasm as he elaborates a conceit of his own, a numeral system based on trinities. James’s amazement is tempered by the curate’s smile, coloured once again with his old, wayward humour. No, not on the Trinity itself, he murmurs, but on a triadic base, which gives quite different, exciting results than that of your binary code. Would a society, Father Beausang muses, whose mathematics were built on a triadic code, have radically different social characteristics? Two, after

all, is an oddly unsatisfying concept. With two one has the dialogue, the linear, but with three one has the conspiracy of space. And thus the triangle, perhaps even more than the circle, is the symbol of harmony; of definition within unity rather than just unity itself. Of course such a triangle can admit of no intrusion. A new element added and it becomes square, another and it becomes a pentagon – (ibid 264).

Though he claims not be speaking of the Holy Trinity, Father Beausang's theory cannot help but be rooted in it. The ties between Catholicism and Irish families and relationships are best and most often portrayed in Jordan's work as triadic. And of these trinities, it is most often the relationship between father, son and the woman they both desire that plays a major role, especially in novels like *The Past* and *Shade*.

Emer and Kevin Rockett account for this fascination not only in Jordan's work, but also in Irish literature generally: "Arguably, in a colonised state, where the land (or even the process of production) is not the father's to give to the son, resolution of the oedipal crisis is frustrated" (ibid 104). Similarly, Ruth Barton contends that, especially where gendering the nation is concerned in Irish film, "weak fathers beget rebel sons but the dynamics of patriarchy render them politically impotent and hence driven to excesses of performative masculinity" (ibid 113). Indeed, this seems astonishingly apt in the case of the boy in "Night in Tunisia" and his cinematic counterpart, Jimmy (*The Miracle*), who are bored and exasperated by their unsuccessful fathers, and Neil in "A Love," who is so furious with his doddering, kindly father that he tries to kill him with a Civil War rifle one night. Yet other characters possess a strong (if inadvisable) love of their fathers.

Luke in *The Past*, Francie in *The Butcher Boy* and Patrick “Kitten” in *Breakfast on Pluto* hold their fathers in high esteem, to a fault.

Michael Collins does not possess the same competition between father and son. Rather, a young woman (Kitty, portrayed by Julia Roberts) becomes the mutual love interest for Harry Boland (Aidan Quinn) and Michael (Liam Neeson), who are best friends. A description of near-identical scenes within *Michael Collins*, *Sunrise*, and “A Love” will be given in the next chapter, but it is important to recognize that this love triangle between father, son and a woman between their two ages occurs in Jordan’s first two major publications and recurs with striking similarity in these later works.

Politics: The Past and Michael Collins

In several of his published stories and films, Jordan comments on Ireland’s early 20th century politics, if obliquely. His portrayal of Éamon de Valera in *The Past* is telling, especially given his later portrayal of the Irish politician (played by Alan Rickman) in *Michael Collins*. The first mention of de Valera within Jordan’s work occurs, as discussed in the last chapter, in “A Love.” It is worth noting that this is on the occasion of the politician’s death and his funeral procession through Dublin, as if Jordan were only able to speak of him posthumously. In the short story he is described as aloof and this characterization continues throughout *The Past* where subtle contrast develops between this reserved and unemotional de Valera and the more sympathetic – even emotionally vulnerable Michael O’Shaughnessy character. This comparison is, in fact, much like the characters of de Valera and Michael Collins in *Michael Collins*. Jordan seems to pit one against the other – appropriately enough – in the film and a similar dichotomy is

established in *The Past*, in which Jordan's portrait of the emotionally available Michael O'Shaughnessy – the pro-treaty Irish nationalist who is assassinated in 1921 during the Civil War (like Collins) contrasts distinctly with the portrayal of the anti-treaty nationalist, de Valera. Whereas Michael is shown to be a devoted father – his love of Rene is especially apparent when he holds her on the chairlift in Bray just before he dies, weeping and instructing her always to love her mother. No such sympathetic portrayal is given of de Valera in the novel. Instead, he is described as a rather cold intellectual, who relishes his tour of the Irish countryside not for its relaxed beauty, but for its scientifically rejuvenating effects:

And the smell of hay [...] reminds de Valera of nothing so much as the yellowing water that comes from the round hold of the sulphur spring. He is familiar with all the rites of his small nation. He has memorised the precise balance of sulphur, iodine and phosphorous in the separate springs and yet all four springs are one to him, part of that healing process, the bubbling core, the well of cold health, Clare, renewal, that elusive elixir of abstention politics and national health. [...] As he drives through County Clare, the intensely humid landscape steams the [...] His face is abstract and expressionless, though somewhat kindly, eternally fixed in that gaze with which it met photographers, as if now it is anticipating a photograph. [...] He is considering a scheme for turf-fuelled power stations. (Jordan 2005, 286, 288-9)

Contrast this with the healing properties of the sulphur waters taken by the Neil's old lover in "A Love" and even the constitutional way in which they are taken by Michael

and Una during her pregnancy at the beginning of the *The Past*; comparatively, de Valera's almost duty-bound sense of visiting the sulphur waters in Clare is far less connected to a sense of well-being or community than to measured efficiency and even possibly keeping up appearances during his campaign. Always working, it seems, de Valera has constantly on his mind the health and wealth of his small nation and, appropriately, the prospects for modernization and industry are on his mind as he tours the west. When visiting the sulphur springs, he is reminded of St. Brigit – who Jordan also mentions in “Outpatient” and whose feast day Rene is born on. Brigit is the saint who is said to have “created flames out of mud and sand in an empty grate, who transformed an arid bog into a field of yellowing hay” (ibid 294). Who, moreover, made much of Ireland's diverse land and harnessed its power just as de Valera aims to do. He makes a note to visit her well and thus the mysterious and myth-laden rural Irish history and its more contemporary politics – and most infamous politician – are conflated.

The curious depiction of de Valera throughout *The Past* matches Jordan's description of him in “A Love” as angular, defiant, composed and always distant. But in the novel, this description is gradually filled out and expanded upon, as the above passage demonstrates. The play of stern aloofness and yet something appealing and even kind about the man is mediated through photography: it is only through reproductions of de Valera's face – and the narrator's imagination of his thoughts – that we have access to who the politician might have been. As in “A Love”, Jordan's description of de Valera physically, is quite harsh:

There is a sharp aquiline nose, a rigorous mouth without a trace of humour, and a pair of wire-framed spectacles [which obscure his eyes, the

woman says in “A Love”]. The eyes on the poster reflect his own abstraction, and with it a quite terrifying certainty. They stare into the distance, embedded with the mathematics of vision. [...] There is something foolish, horselike in the features which only adds to their allure (Jordan 2005, 130).

The portrayal of de Valera in *Michael Collins* – and indeed, the film’s portrayal of War of Independence and Civil War politics more generally – has been the aspect of the film frequently criticized as inaccurate. The film, which covers the six years between the Easter Rising in 1916 and Collins’ assassination during the Civil War in 1921, is more a character study of Collins (played by Liam Neeson) than a chronicle of political events. Jordan’s particular use of history and politics in *Michael Collins* mirrors his use of them in *The Past*, particularly in the novel’s first half, when Michael O’Shaughnessy is still alive and participating in the War of Independence and subsequent Civil War. Rather than concentrating on political details, however, both film and novel can be read as using twentieth century Irish politics as a *backdrop* (rather than the main event) for character interrelationships. Emer and Kevin Rockett confirm this when they say that, through the triangular relationship developed with Collins and his real life friends, Harry Boland and Kitty Kiernan, “what is seen is Jordan’s clearest representation of his attitude to the relationship of the violent male world of the public sphere and how it impinges adversely on the private world of the domestic sphere. *Michael Collins* is, above all else, a story of love destroyed by politics” (ibid 166).

Both *The Past* and *Michael Collins* concentrate less on the details of Ireland’s emergence as a Free State and more on the character relationships that developed therein.

Indeed, the same might be said of the political settings of *The Crying Game* and *Breakfast on Pluto*, where Troubles politics figure only as a cursory context for the introduction of characters whose lives ultimately intersect only marginally with the Northern Irish conflict.²⁶ Brian McIlroy's article on *Michael Collins*, "History Without Borders," suggests another reason for this sometimes erroneous depiction of Irish politics: that the film is looking back into history, yet "implicitly looks to the present and future" as well (1999, 23). He argues that several of the historical inaccuracies in the film (a car bomb and the use of an armoured car in the Croke Park massacre scene), as well as the casting of two well-known Northern Irish actors – Neeson in the title role and Stephen Rea (who converted from Protestantism to Catholicism and reportedly has no sympathies for Northern unionism) as a government employee for the British in Dublin who aids Michael Collins – implicitly comment on the Troubles in Northern Ireland. He further argues that, more than anything else, "the film is about politics" (ibid 24). McIlroy suggests, justifiably, that with *Michael Collins*, Jordan uses Ireland's ballistic early twentieth century history to comment on its current struggles with and in Northern Ireland. Considering that Jordan's later use with the Troubles in film (*Angel*, *The Crying Game* and *Breakfast on Pluto*) focuses more on character development than on doggedly recreating a political timetable, it is likely that Jordan sees the potential for political conflict and violence to profoundly affect people's lives and is far more interested in exploring those lives than in foregrounding that conflict with meticulous detail.

²⁶ The turbulent period in which Northern Irish citizens – particularly in the city centres of Derry and Belfast – were subjected to (and/or involved in) sectarian violence is widely and euphemistically referred to as "the Troubles". The period stretches from 1968 – when a Civil Rights movement established by members of the minority Catholic communities dissatisfied with treatment by the majority Protestant communities in the North was met with Protestant backlash – to 1993 and onward, when the peace process and ceasefires were declared, faltered, and were established again until roughly 2005, when the Provisional Irish Republican Army (or Provisional IRA) completed the process of disarmament.

Where de Valera is portrayed, Jordan implies a very real participation in Michael Collins' assassination, although controversy still swirls around the question of his involvement – if any. “Although Jordan implies that de Valera was “in the mix” with the plans to ambush Collins, a problematic interpretation to many historians, it is not the most provocative aspect of the film, nor is it a new accusation” (McIlroy 1999, 25). Jordan's portrayal of de Valera is given another layer of nuance in his choice of casting Alan Rickman, a *British* actor, in the role. If nothing else, this choice implies an “otherness,” which is strongly evoked in *The Past* and “A Love” as well.²⁷ Rickman's de Valera is much like the man described in *The Past*: serious, stern and almost entirely humourless.

The weight of Irish politics are heavy upon James Vance's mind in *The Past*. Coming from a Protestant family and having married a Catholic woman, but with no real religious affiliations at all, his understanding of contemporary (early twentieth century) national politics is compromised. The creation of the Free State in the 1920s, distinct from British colonial power, cannot be considered outside of religious politics. One of the ways Irish nationalists distinguished themselves from the British colonizer was through religion. Simply put, the major religion of the Republic of Ireland has always been Catholicism, as opposed to the England's Protestant majority (not to mention Northern Ireland's Protestant majority). De Valera openly privileged the Catholic Church and family in the first decades of the Free State; conflating religious affiliation with national identity. Consequently, James often finds himself out of his element when talking about politics, but his distance in terms of religion quite possibly better suits him to

²⁷ In fact, de Valera was born in New York City, possibly illegitimately, to an Irish mother and a Cuban-Spanish father.

understanding the folly and hypocritical nature of this era's politics. The following passage is from a discussion he has in the middle of the novel with Miss Meredith, a spinster trying to win his affection:

We are both anti-Treatyites, Mr Vance, but I have heard from opposite points of view. You are really a Republican? I would favour, you tell her, a syndicalist model along the lines of Proudhon —, Ah, Miss Meredith interrupts, but he was a Frenchman and respectable, quite a different specimen from your de Valera, who is Irish and disreputable. American, you counter. Or is it Spanish— And your imagination wanders, as it always does when confronted with the intricacies of politics, beliefs that refuse to form themselves into any semblance of order” (Jordan 2005, 135).²⁸

Throughout the rest of his work, Jordan does not return to this era of Irish politics, portraying the more recent Northern Irish conflict (the Troubles) if he refers to politics at all. It took sixteen years for him to tackle his interest in de Valera and Free State politics (quite central to *The Past* and “A Love”) on the big screen. *Michael Collins* represents his only film on this turning-point in Irish history although, as mentioned above, his interest is always more about human relationships and how they are affected by political conflict, rather than in period piece chronicles of Ireland's struggle.

Catholicism

²⁸ “Proudhon —“ is Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the nineteenth century French socialist and philosopher who famously declared “Property is theft!” and was a colleague of Karl Marx. Vance, an estate owner, is particularly bold to ally himself to Proudhon.

Jordan's lapsed Catholicism can be felt throughout the bulk of his work, including those films which he has adapted from other sources. This will be elaborated on in the next chapter and it is worth noting the obvious influence of the religion from Jordan's earliest work onward. As in the stories contained in the *Night in Tunisia* collection ("Skin", "Outpatient" and "Tree") discussed in the first chapter, Catholic imagery permeates *The Past*. Particularly echoing "Skin", where the protagonist imagines herself as the Virgin Mary, like the statuette of the saint in her hallway, Rene is likewise fascinated by the statuette of "Our Lady" in her classroom as a young girl. Jordan carefully details Rene's religious education in Dublin in 1921 in *The Past*. When the class is dutifully taught about sin, Rene listens enraptured; she is fascinated by the explanation of where sin comes from, the strange web of rules handed down by the Catholic Church and the polar extremes of good and evil. Her childlike curiosity and earnest interest inspires her to daydream and she imagines God to be a vast ocean, once again introducing the omnipresent sea into the mind of a Jordanian character:

[Sister Paul] tells you how up to that moment you could not sin because you were not aware of sin but how after that moment the awareness of sin that she is handing you like a gift will make it possible for you to sin. And you accept a further slice of knowledge which defines this sense of difference in you, the fact that now every action will have to be balanced and passed between the twin primaries of sin and virtue, and that between them there will be an expanse of medial tones and that, no matter how fragile this difference in tone, there will always come a point where white swings imperceptibly into black, beyond which you will be able to say,

Now I have sinned. You wonder whether this sense of sin is a gift to be developed, whether you must learn to sin as you once learnt to walk. You sense that these words she is imposing on the flow of your days are somewhat arbitrary [...] And yet there is comfort in the language and Sister Paul has after all impressed on you that knowledge can never be useless. [...] And you imagine God then to be a sea [...] the largest expanse you can imagine; you suspect that this is not the sea you know, always the lowest point in the landscape, but a sea that is placed somewhere above your experience, mirroring the sea that you know, permeating you with its backwards waves (ibid 67-8).

The tension between reverence and contempt for Catholicism runs through much of Jordan's writing and films. Rene's otherwise very peaceful image of a Catholic God as "backwards waves" is a rather overt comment on her understanding of the paradoxes of the Church. The arbitrariness of the rules of sin and redemption imposed on Catholic parishioners and the paradox of being born into sin are juxtaposed with the great comfort Rene feels for the language of the religion and, later, the sense of community it instills. Still, Catholic imagery is usually used in Jordan's work to upend traditional expectations, especially where the Virgin Mary is concerned. We have already seen this in "Skin" and *The Past* and will continue to be confronted with these unusual uses of Catholic imagery in *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, *The Butcher Boy*, *The End of the Affair*, *In Dreams* and *Breakfast on Pluto*.

If we consider Jordan's subsequent work, *The Past* provides keystones upon which he will return to again and again. In fact, together with *Night in Tunisia*, Jordan

appears to have laid down a kind of map pinpointing the themes and curious character pairings that have distinguished so much of his later work, including his films. The novel fits quite seamlessly within a body of work spanning three decades; it possesses a kind of constant self-reference that, although it cannot be mistaken for autobiography, provides insight into Jordan's own experiences of youth, romance, the search for self through uncovering familial history and fatherhood.²⁹ "Everything turns to everything else," the narrator imagines James thinking at the end of *The Past* (299). And indeed, it seems that all of Jordan's writing and several of his films echo back on each other.

²⁹ Most transparently in the short stories "Night in Tunisia" and "A Love"; in the explorations of first-time fatherhood present in *The Past* and *The Dream of a Beast*; and the father/son relationship explored in *Sunrise with Sea Monster*.

CHAPTER THREE

FANTASY, TRINITY, DEVELOPMENT OF THEMES

In the mid 1990s Jordan was well-established both as a writer and a filmmaker. Having published another novel, *Sunrise with Sea Monster* (entitled *Nightlines* in the UK) in 1994, shortly after the release of *The Crying Game* and *Interview with the Vampire* to wide acclaim, Jordan spoke of the difficulty he had in trying to separate his method in each respective craft: “Commenting in 1997, Jordan described *The Past* as being ‘entirely composed of visual description’, adding that he felt he was ‘writing himself out of this form entirely’. He regarded it as ‘pointless to continue writing just to describe what things look like’” (Rockett and Rockett 8). As Emer and Kevin Rockett point out, two years prior to the interview, he had mentioned the difficulty in writing novels after he had started to make films, particularly as his urge to describe things visually seemed to make obsolete his motivation for writing fiction. Nonetheless, Jordan has persisted with both art forms and has continued to tease out common themes and imagery in each work, sometimes to drastically different effect. This chapter continues the study of Jordanian premises and imagery throughout his later career, particularly the development of fantasy and the surreal in both writing and filmmaking. The following will explore how specific themes and landscapes – such as trinities, families, Catholicism, and the clash of Irish landscape and politics – develop throughout his oeuvre.

Jordan’s writing often contains stream-of-consciousness narration. As the passages quoted in the previous chapters have demonstrated, he is frequently unconcerned with quotation marks to demarcate dialogue, lending his stories the blurred boundaries of a dream as well as the chance spontaneity of emotional encounter.

Interestingly, this blurring – or overt destruction – of boundaries is a quality for which Jordan's work is well known (e.g., Rockett and Rockett). It is likely this feeling of constant narration that lends his characters such an intensely personal interior space. Meanwhile, Jordan's films are free of the otherwise common trope of voice-over narration (with the exception of *The End of the Affair*). Where narration functions to detail emotional experience in his writing, the same goal is met using image and performance in his films.

In a 1993 interview, Jordan spoke of his approach to *The Crying Game*: "I like to take stories that have a realistic beginning, that start from the point of realism and go to some other place that is surrealistic. I suppose there is a certain impatience with reality. That sort of thing, that's Irish" (Rockett and Rockett 15, quoting Marina Burke's interview for *Film Ireland*) It is this quote that launches Emer and Kevin Rockett's book on the director which, they write, explores his "'realist' and 'non-realist' modes, and 'rational' and 'irrational' worlds, [as part] of a process in Jordan's stretching of boundaries, not only of the family and of the 'nation', but of humanity itself" (ibid). Indeed, this melting point between the real and the surreal, the possible and the impossible, seems a key element to understanding his work.

The Dream of a Beast

Jordan's only novella, *The Dream of a Beast*, was first published in 1983, between the release of his first two films, *Angel* (1982) and *The Company of Wolves* (1984). Thematically, the novella has much in common with both films, especially the theme of transformation and fantasy, which permeates all three works. Transformation is also at

the heart of *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Butcher Boy* (though perhaps more psychologically than physically in the latter). Another parallel between novella and films is the depiction of the triadic family: husband, wife and child. The “normal,” though unhappy familial trio described at the beginning of the novella morphs (as it so often does within Jordan’s literature and films) into a decidedly atypical trinity, a focus of Jordan’s already explored in the previous two chapters. *The Dream of a Beast* is the first instance of Jordan’s preoccupation with the idea of the beast and of transformation. A man begins to feel increasingly unable to communicate with his family and, through a series of dream-like and symbolic chapters, ostracizes himself from both his wife and daughter, begins an affair with a woman and is transformed into a beast, only to be reunited with an equally transformed “version” of his family by the film’s end. Throughout the story, each everyday aspect of life – from family and work to the very pavement of the city – takes on an unfamiliar and unnatural quality. The story begins with the unnamed protagonist walking home from work. The city – Dublin – is described as strange and swollen with the summer humidity: “Streets I had walked on all my life began to grow strange blooms in the crevices. The stalks would ease their way along the shopfronts and thick, oily, unrecognizable leaves would cover the plate-glass windows” (Jordan 1993, 89). Already, the imagery of the wild suffocating the orderly is apparent – the quote is from the novella’s first page. And within the next few pages, the man feels the slow creep of transformation come over him, obscuring his perception of himself and his family, and eventually the world as well: “I turned upstairs and saw my fleeting shape in the mirror over the first steps. I stopped and walked back down. That shadow had for some reason disturbed me. I saw my shoulder enter the left-hand corner of the mirror and started. I

hardly recognized the stranger who stared back at me” (ibid 93-4). His gradual transformation into a beast parallels his crumbling marriage, which has become a routine of polite tolerance. It is tempting to read autobiography into this story since we know that Jordan’s marriage to Vivienne Shields ended in divorce (the woman’s name in the story, Marianne, so resembles Vivienne).

References to beasts in the *The Dream of a Beast* range from fairytales the man reads to his daughter, Matilde, to the “beast with two backs” (96) formed by the man and his wife as they make love to the darkening and thickening of his skin and nails and the pain of physical transformation (a feeling of “fur in [his] throat”) when he is tempted by a woman (103). The imagery of the transformation is paralleled by the progressively broken marriage, which is marked by uncomfortable silences during which the protagonist feels much like the buildings at the story’s beginning: “I knew there was nothing I could do to dispel this silence. It had its roots in things done and said and it was like ivy now, twining around me” (99).

Angel, meanwhile, takes place during the Troubles in Northern Ireland and follows Danny (Stephen Rea), a saxophonist, through the Irish landscape (both north and south) as he seeks revenge for the deaths of a band member and a deaf-mute girl he had an affair with just before they were murdered by anonymous men at a nightclub. As the initially quiet and mild-mannered Danny becomes more and more obsessed with finding the murderers, he is transformed into a murderously violent man himself. As Emer and Kevin Rockett noted about *Michael Collins*, *Angel* is equally “above all else, a story of love destroyed by violence” (165-6).

Violent transformations are also at the centre of *The Company of Wolves*, co-written by Jordan and the noted author and fairy tale revisionist, Angela Carter. The movie is a subversion of “The Little Red Riding Hood” fairytale, a rollicking tale of sexual awakening and abandonment of traditional mores and conservative warnings. The film is the meandering dream of a pubescent girl, Rosaleen (Sarah Patterson), who is warned by her grandmother of salacious, lupine men who prey on pretty girls. Her mother, meanwhile, is more open with her about the sexual urges which she describes as natural. Rosaleen’s independence and irrepressible curiosity lead her to wander the forest, where she climbs a tree and discovers a nest of ruby lip gloss, a compact mirror and eggs which hatch into tiny clay babies who cry real tears.

The dream-like imagery in *The Dream of a Beast* resembles this film so strongly that it could have come straight from Rosaleen’s discovery of the bird’s nest and hatched clay cherub in the treetop:

I saw my monstrous head reflected there, ringed by a circle of eggs. Were they the swan’s, or the woman’s, I wondered and lifted one of them out. The heat of my unruly paw was anathema to it, for the droplets of water began to sizzle and steam and a crack sped across the white surface. The sheaves of egg fell away and a cherub stood there, creaking its downy wings. One by one the other eggs split and cherubs beat their way to the ceiling. They settled into niches in the plasterwork. (Jordan 1993, 131).

In *The Company of Wolves*, the symbolic well spring of feminine coming-of-age fascinates Rosaleen, who finds that her impending puberty stirs the “beast” within her and – like the man (played by Stephen Rea) who morphs into a werewolf during one of

granny's cautionary tales – willingly gives herself over to her bestial urges, transforms into a wolf and runs off with the pack. Rosaleen is awoken from this dream by the pack of wolves crashing through her bedroom windows and tearing up her parents' pristine house, an ambiguous denouement that is both a frightening metaphor for the sometimes upsetting onslaught of adolescence (particularly for girls) and an unsettling symbol for the destruction of the traditional cautionary tale which we have just seen. It also possibly suggests that granny was right: that letting the wolf in is the most dangerous thing of all.

This theme of destruction and the use of fantastic, sometimes surreal imagery can also be found in other Jordan films. In *The Miracle*, Jimmy's friend Rose becomes fascinated with the coarse young lion tamer who works for the traveling circus. She fantasizes about taming him, an act she hopes to accomplish by offering her virginity to him and, disappointed with the results, she instead releases the circus' wild animals to stomp through the Irish seaside town of Bray. The image is among the most memorable in *The Miracle* and conflates wild, even bestial aggression with sex and sexuality. The young Francie Brady in *The Butcher Boy* is equally affected haunted by Mrs. Nugent's taunts that his family lives like pigs and he eventually embraces the slur murderously, attacking Mrs. Nugent like a wild animal and scrawling "pigs" on the walls in her own blood.

The Dream of a Beast is far more morose in tone than any of Jordan's films (with the possible exception of *The End of the Affair*). The tone is brooding and contemplative, much like the fairy tale, *Beauty and the Beast*. In fact, this is perhaps the strongest theme resembling his films: the use of interiority; the privileging of individual emotion and

“dreamspace” over historical accuracy, realistic chronology, multiple character exploration (see *Angel*, *Company of Wolves*, *Mona Lisa*, *Michael Collins* and especially *The Butcher Boy* and *In Dreams* for this privileging of singular character development and emotional journey). In fact, this singular character focus is carried through most of Jordan’s writing, as well as his films.

It is interesting how Jordan uses the dream motif in this novella. Dreams are frequent for the story’s main character, the husband/beast, and usually frighten or alarm him. In one particularly strange dream, the man imagines that his daughter, now a beautiful young woman, is in love with him (141-2). The man, in his confused dream state, senses that he has been away from his daughter all these years, and that she no longer recognizes him as her father. This Oedipal confusion of parentage strongly foreshadows the mother-son affair in *The Miracle*, and the relationship between Bob (Nick Nolte) and Anne (Nutsa Kukhianidze), who is young enough to be Bob’s daughter, in *The Good Thief* (2002). In the novella, the man/beast rejects Matilde’s advances and wakes up. Yet his waking state is much like his dream state. The whole novella is written from the man’s perspective and, since he is constantly unsure of himself and unsure of the world around him, the entire story builds on an uncertainty even that the ground will be beneath his feet at the next step; the disconnect between reality and the interior of his mind becomes increasingly blurred.

References to fairytales contribute to the otherworldliness of *The Dream of a Beast*. Beyond the overt references to fairytales in Matilde’s storybooks and in the young boy’s retelling of “Jack and the Beanstalk” (ibid 167) and “The Little Mermaid” (ibid 171), there is also a strong reference to *Little Red Riding Hood*, when the woman carries

a basket of food to the beast and later flees from him, terrified by his complete transformation and unable to see the man he once was:

It's the night, she said, you're different. No, I cried. She was standing now, walking backwards towards the staircase. You should never have let me sleep, she whispered. The dark moulded her like a curtain, her hair glowed like sullen rust. I can't help my fear, she whispered, you should never have let me sleep. Her hand searched for the metal staircase. No, I whispered again, but my whisper gathered like a roar. She ran from that wall of sound. Somewhere above me, the stars began to fall (155).

This passage also resembles *Beauty and the Beast* and has particular resonance with the scene in *The Miracle* when Renee is lying on the grass with her son, seemingly horrified at what has just taken place (the details of which are ambiguous to us, but imply that some sort of sexual transgression might have occurred). From that point, she retreats from her son/lover, Jimmy, though he begs her to stay.

By the end of his novella, Jordan's triangular family has metamorphosed: his nuclear family (mother, father, daughter) is broken apart and a new, atypical family takes its place. The man breaks up the mother-daughter-father triad early on with his affair and the deepening loss of communication he feels with his wife. In this dream, his lover fills the place of wife and the young boy who befriends him (and, like his daughter, is fascinated by fairy tales: *ibid* 167, 171) takes the place of his daughter. Within this man-lover-boy triad, as the city of Dublin becomes unrecognizable in the summer haze and begins to crumble away, the man fully transforms into a beast.

By the story's end, the trinity has shifted once more to become woman-man-eternity. In a hazy dream-like purgatory, the man is in a sea where it is "not quite daylight and not quite night" (ibid, 173) Travelling with the boy, who is sick and dying, the man incorporates him into his own body, becoming both man and boy at once (ibid). Finally, the man is reunited with his wife, Marianne, who has incorporated their daughter into herself (or has reverted to a state of pregnancy). Both man and woman also implicitly stand for husband and wife as well as mother and father; both have consumed their respective children. This is particularly reminiscent of Cronus in Greek mythology (Saturn in Roman mythology), who ate his children for fear that they would overthrow him as leader of the Titans, though in Jordan's story, the incorporation is instead a way for husband and wife to allow the children to live on within them. This incorporation imagery – and the preoccupation within the story of children and childrearing – is probably related to Jordan's foray into fatherhood: his two daughters with his first wife, Vivienne Shields, were born in the 1970s.

Later work: building on themes

Family, Trinity and the Sea

As can be seen in the previous chapters, the roots of many of Jordan's recurring themes are often autobiographical, especially within his early written work. "Last Rites," "Night in Tunisia," "A Love," *The Past* and *The Dream of a Beast* all contain imagery and characters which, we can reasonably assume, have their origins in Jordan's memories of his childhood and his experiences as a husband and father. These early stories also

contain themes that will recur, with varying intensity, throughout much of Jordan's subsequent work.

In *Exploring Boundaries*, Emer and Kevin Rockett note that the family "can be seen as an Irish preoccupation. Even in the Irish Constitution, the family is recognized as the basic unity of the state, while it has been one of the staples of Irish cinema, particularly since the 1970s, where it has been dissected and challenged. [...These] films [...] largely view the family as a psychosexual quagmire of repression and violence" (206).

Jordan often returns to the subject of the dysfunctional or atypical family. Within these, his focus is usually on a trinity of characters – a group of people who are almost always on the social and cultural margins, both in fiction and in film. As Desmond O'Rawe concisely notes,

Critical treatments of Neil Jordan's films invariably involve the analysis of their narrative convolutions, thematic scope and politico-cultural representations: triangular relationships and the frustration of desire, transgression and transformation, and the crisis of subjectivity being among the more common examples (189).

Indeed, Jordan's literature can also be included in these categories of analysis. Quite often, Jordan's stories centre on the "constructed" family, made up friends and lovers as well as blood relatives. This is no less the case in *Sunrise with Sea Monster* (1994) and *The Past* as it is in *The Miracle* and *Interview with the Vampire. Interview...* chronicles the relationship between three vampires: the child, Claudia, and her two "fathers," Louis and Lestat. Of this unusual trinity of characters Jordan has said, "in many ways, I'm

telling the story of a deeply dysfunctional family, except here the family unit is two vampires, Louis and Lestat, and their ‘adopted’ child, Claudia” (Jones 24). As Candace R. Benefiel notes, the scenes involving the upbringing of Claudia as a vampire “are humorous and chillingly precise because they are so close to reality. [...] They intensify the feeling that what we are seeing is not some ethereal fantasy involving impossible creatures, but rather a domestic drama that closely resembles ordinary family life” (269, 270). Clearly, Jordan is drawn to interpretations of the unconventional family unit, especially in groupings of three, which he returns to again in *The Miracle*, *The Butcher Boy*, *In Dreams*, *The End of the Affair* and especially *Breakfast on Pluto*.

The impetus for these constructed families is often an absent mother.³⁰ Whether because of death or abandonment, the motherless family is central to the development of triangular relationships, particularly between two men and a woman. As previously mentioned, the Jordanian trinity (and particularly the love triangle) is suffused throughout his oeuvre more than any other defining characteristic. It is in the very fabric of Jordanian storytelling, both on the page and the screen including, in chronological order, “A Love,” *The Past*, *The Miracle*, *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *The Butcher Boy*, *Shade* and *Breakfast on Pluto*.

Jordan’s second novel, *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, was first published in 1994 and is another tale of the morphing triangular family with several striking similarities to Jordan’s next, most recent novel, *Shade* (2004). The first relationship described in

³⁰ Although Jordan’s narratives featuring motherless families could equally be described as families without wives or matriarchs, it is the children who are the protagonists of these narratives (Neil in “A Love,” Jimmy in *The Miracle*, Donal in *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, Francie in *The Butcher Boy*, Nina in *Shade* and Patrick “Kitten” in *Breakfast on Pluto*). Thus, the absent woman is most appropriately described in her relationship to the protagonist.

Sunrise – that of father-mother-son – has barely begun to be explored when the mother dies of illness. As with the initial trinity established in *Shade* of father-mother-daughter, the family must make do without a mother early on.³¹ To console himself after his mother's death, the son in *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, Donal, imagines that after she died her soul went out to sea, providing another strong tie between woman and the sea which has already been seen in "Skin" and *The Past*. After the mother's death in *Sunrise*, both father and son live together in eastern Ireland near Dublin for years, catching fish from the salty shores until the father hires a music teacher for Donal and the familial trinity is slowly, if problematically restored. Rose, the young piano tutor, becomes the object of desire for both young Donal and his father. Rose and Donal eventually begin an affair, which lasts for some time until Rose's guilt over the inappropriate relationship overwhelms her. Eventually she marries Donal's father and when he falls ill to a debilitating stroke, Donal and Rose take him to Lisdoonvarna – a now familiar setting in Jordanian writing – hoping that the sulphur springs will restore his health.³² Instead, he dies in Clare and it is only upon subsequent reflection that Donal realizes how important a figure his father was in his life.

It is the trinity of the incomplete or unusual family to which Jordan returns time and again. This is particularly well-expressed in *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, when each character – father, son, and lover – seem dependant upon each other: "We became a family of a kind, a warped reflection of one, but at least a family. Outside of time, of the

³¹ In *Shade*, although Nina's mother, Elizabeth, does not die, she becomes increasingly jealous of the close relationship between daughter and father and slowly distances herself emotionally from them

³² In fact, Donal takes Rose and his father there under pretense of taking the waters, but he has, in fact, become involved in a spy operation for the Spanish government. The details of that plotline are unimportant to this analysis, however.

ferocious time that waged round the continent beyond us.” (108) The epitome of the Jordanian family can thus be found in *Sunrise*; this family can generally be described as encompassing an unusual group of characters who seem not to belong together, forbidden love, a falling out between father and son, the son’s journey away from – and inevitable return to – home (as in *Butcher Boy*, *Interview*, *Affair*, *The Miracle*, *In Dreams*, *Breakfast on Pluto*) the untimely death or abandonment of the biological mother, instatement of stepmother and subsequent Oedipal urges. The family triad crumbles without any one person (the mother dies in *Sunrise* leaving Donal and his father with a great emptiness between them; Francie Brady’s life begins its horrible downward spiral after the death of his mother; and Michael and Kitty’s relationship with Harry Boland disintegrates once they become engaged). This is also true of the relationship between Rose and Donal after the father has died in *Sunrise*:

A silence settled between us that we knew was a permanent. At night I dreamt of him, traversing the waves of the Clare coastline like a merman, in an element that perhaps would have suited him more than most. Rose slept beside me, frozen in her loss, her body stiff and unattainable. Now that he was gone he was all she could desire, and I was the cause of the absence that gnawed at her, as she was of the absence that gnawed at me (Jordan 1994, 163).

The connection between sea, family, life, death and memory in Jordan’s work is particularly strong at the end of *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, when Donal realizes how important his father has been in his life, though he rarely acknowledged it:

He died in the sea to the west and the sea itself depended on him for its continued existence, since why else would I have sat beside it, or beside this river, its drab, half-forgotten tributary? [...] The sea was all about death, and death drew into itself all the moments of its attendant lives and my attempt to understand this sea had taken years now and one memory would draw me towards it, always the same, lapping like a rising tide when you had forgotten there was such a thing as water, for you had thought the tide had retreated, your bare feet had grown used to the hard scalloped sand and yet there it was, creeping round your ankles saying, in so many words, remember me. And the memory was this. The two of us, laying nightlines for the umpteenth time at low tide (ibid 168-169).

This conflation of sea with life and death flows throughout Jordan's work. Donal's childhood fantasy about the final resting place of his mother, for instance, is strikingly similar to that of George's fantasy about Nina in *Shade*. This most recent novel tells the story of Nina's life – from birth, through childhood with friends Janie and George, her love for her half-brother, Gregory, her adolescence and adulthood and even long into her death. It is narrated by Nina herself, and the strong relationship between her and the water surrounding her house near the River Boyne can be felt well into her death:

The rains come down for days, the river rises, bursts its banks, the tributaries spill into one, not so much a river as a meandering lake, lapping right up to the remade glasshouse. The house sits beached on the Irish sea, the trees perched on the water's surface like surprised seagulls. [...] I'm part of it now, the horizon, that endless line that stretches from the

glasshouse door to Wales and Liverpool. [...] I am the river now, the seaweed my hair, the barnacles my bed, the long slow womanly weight of water dragging me towards the house when the tide flows, away from it when it ebbs (Jordan 2004, 316).

This imagery resembles the underwater scenes in *In Dreams* (1999). In the film, a “normal,” happy nuclear family of three is torn violently apart when the daughter, Rebecca (Katie Sagona) is kidnapped – and eventually killed – by Vivian Thompson (Robert Downey Jr.), a serial killer hoping to force familial normalcy upon his victims to make up for his own abusive childhood and parents who left him for dead as a boy. Vivian functions as both mother and father to his various victims until Rebecca’s mother, Claire (Annette Bening), who is clairvoyant, begins to hunt Vivian down, disrupting his routine. Claire and Vivian haunt each other’s dreams and, at the film’s climax, die together in a river in the Adirondacks of New York State. As Claire is dying, she sees a vision of Rebecca, calling her down into the water. Claire is finally “home” in a watery grave with her daughter, mirroring Vivian’s escape from one at the film’s beginning (discussed below). This conflation of water, women and death is also hinted at in “Skin,” whose protagonist feels most at home in the sea, if only briefly. The theme is also a central characteristic of *The Dream of a Beast*, where both husband and wife incorporate children into themselves, die and are born again in the sea at the end of this surreal novella. Finally, in *Sunrise with Sea Monster*, both Donal’s parents are associated with the sea after their deaths; Donal has a vision of his father being resurrected from the sea where he died only to disappear again into the salty, misty sea to be with Donal’s mother (Jordan 1994, 182-3). This striking recurrence of sea and death is one of the most

important symbols in Jordan's literature, though it occurs less often in his films.

Considered within Jordan's work as a whole (and taking into account the analysis of *The Past*, in particular), these themes can be seen as uniquely Jordanian. The ways in which his stories – both in writing and in film – overlap with each other conveys a unique worldview within Jordan's body of work. With regard to this overlap, a scene that recurs in "A Love," *Sunrise with Sea Monster* and *Michael Collins* is particularly striking. All three works contain love triangles: in "A Love" and *Sunrise*, these triangles comprise father and son and the young woman they both desire; in *Michael Collins*, it is best friends and the woman they both desire. The scenerio first occurred in "A Love" (see chapter one): the father takes the woman he is trying to woo and his teenaged son, Neil, to dinner at a hotel in Bundoran, County Donegal (he has also taken them to a variety show in Bray). Unbeknownst to him, Neil has been having an affair with the thirty-nine year old woman for months. While the woman and the father dance, Neil jealously broods at their table, drinking sherry out of their glasses and secretly hating his father for showing such a human vulnerability in his desire for the woman:

The band played waltzes and both of you moved across the floor among other shapeless couples, you beautiful, him tall and supremely confident of something as he waltzed. And I sat there looking and saw him for the first time not as my father who wrote equations on sheets of paper into the night and knew a lot about things like sea-shells but as someone young and agile who had the same yearning for you as I had (Jordan 1993, 81-82).

In *Sunrise*..., the meal shared between the three is a picnic at a now very familiar site within Jordan's literature: Devil's Glen, a holiday village in County Wicklow, near Bray. The father, who hopes to woo Rose (his son's young piano tutor), takes her and his teenaged son, Donal, for a weekend picnic in the Wicklow Hills, unaware that they have been sleeping together for some time. "We trudged through the Devil's Glen, me holding the hamper, the two of them ahead of me [...the] vision of a courting couple. I felt churlish, even ridiculous in my silences but could think of nothing to say" (Jordan, 1994, 49). In both stories, the mother has been dead for years and the young woman who the father hopes will take her place is both much younger than the father and much older than the son. In both cases, the woman begins an affair with the teenaged son and, in *Sunrise*, Rose eventually marries the father. The tension between father and son over a woman is obviously reminiscent of *The Miracle* and looks forward to Jordan's most recent novel, *Shade* (2004), where half-siblings Nina and Gregory are in love with each other, though they feel guilty and, after making love in a barn as teenagers, vow never to speak of it again. These relationships are also versions of the Jordanian family, which is always atypical and non-nuclear and usually also a three-some: Claudia, Louis and Lestat in *Interview with the Vampire*; Renee, Sam and Jimmy in *The Miracle*; Francie, Mrs. Nugent and Our Lady in *The Butcher Boy*; Maurice, Henry and Sarah in *The End of the Affair*; Fergus, Dil and Jody in *The Crying Game*; and Patrick "Kitten", Charlie and Father Bernard in *Breakfast on Pluto*. In *Michael Collins*, it is Michael, his friend Harry and the woman they both adore, Kitty, who go out for dinner. When Harry asks Kitty to dance, Michael watches from their table, clearly jealous, a mirror image of the passage from "A Love" and the character dynamics in *Sunrise*....

Catholic Influence

Just like the guilt felt by half-siblings Nina and Gregory over their love for each other in *Shade*, Rose eventually begins to feel guilty about her affair with the much younger Donal in *Sunrise with Sea Monster*. At first they delight in their immoral affair: “We came to relish our status as sinners, the melancholy of the truly damned” (Jordan 1994, 47). Ultimately, though, the affair between Donal and Rose ends when she feels the weight of guilt upon her:

We came to the station then but she drew me on, through the back streets till we came to the church. Come inside, she told me. So we walked into the draught hall. I watched her sit in the back row beneath a picture of the Garden of Gethsemane. Sit down beside me, she said. I obeyed her and we both looked up at the altar. Now tell Him you’re sorry. I’m not, I told her. How come I am? She asked me. Maybe you’re sorry enough for both of us, I said, and she laughed. We sat in silence for a while. I presumed what she was doing was asking for forgiveness. After a time I let my hand touch her leg. She smacked it away, but laughed again. We’re not getting very far, are we? I asked. She shook her head and blessed herself (ibid 46).

Later in the novel, years after their affair has ended and before Donal’s father has died, they are preparing for the trip to the sulphur springs at Lisdoonvarna in County Clare for Donal’s father, who is totally paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. Before they leave, Rose excitedly recalls her childhood trips to the west:

She told me of trips to Milltown Malbay when she was a child, her memories of the Cliffs of Moher, of the explosion of white on the

whitethorn bushes round the Burren. [...] She described a holy well she remembered near Moher, with a row of crutches outside. Someone must have brought them. So someone must have left them. Who knows, maybe something might happen (Jordan 1994, 142).

Rose is clearly referring to St. Brigit's well, also mentioned in *The Past* and "Outpatient," and hopes for a miracle to cure Donal's father with the same Catholic enthusiasm and faith as the woman in "Outpatient." The white blooms on the whitehorn bushes, recalls the fluttering paper prayers in "Tree." Rose's stalwart faith (also explored below) looks forward to Sarah's (Julianne Moore) faith in *The End of the Affair*, where her plea to God to save Maurice's life is answered and she vows never to see him again. The miraculous is also conveyed in the film when it turns out that Sarah's touch has healed the birthmark on Mr. Parkis' (Ian Hart) son's face. Catholic reverence is strongly linked to women here, as it is in the short stories discussed in this study's first chapter. Here, too, the conflation of the Irish West with myth and religious piety is as clear as ever.

This Catholic guilt and reverence for the Church is felt throughout much of Jordan's work. For example, Jordan added the flooded town which begins *In Dreams* – the imagery is nowhere in Bari Wood's novel, *Doll's Eyes* (1993, upon which the film is loosely based). The scene has particularly strong Catholic resonance (whether reverent or critical) as the camera tracks through the town – which has become a watery grave after being flooded to become a reservoir – and through a decrepit church, up to its spire, which reaches just above the water and clinging to which is a young Vivian Thompson (Downey Jr.), abandoned and left for dead by his deadbeat parents and who will grow up to be the film's antagonist, a considerable bogeyman who haunts the dreams and waking

life of Claire Cooper (Annette Bening). This literal visualization of lapsed religious faith is part of the film's opening scene which Emer and Kevin Rockett describe (quite justifiably) as "one of the finest and most beautiful visual moments in cinematic history" (Rockett and Rockett 207).

Religious influence is also present in "Skin," "Outpatient," "Tree" and *The Past*, discussed in the first two chapters of this study. But Catholic imagery is also particularly strong in *The Butcher Boy* and is, in fact, an indication of the more general (but always Catholic) influence of religion on Jordan's works. In "Seduction" and "Night in Tunisia," nuns play tennis in the seaside town. Everywhere in his work is Catholic imagery, the fear of it, the salve it offers. This is especially true in two of Jordan's recent films, *The Butcher Boy* (1997) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), both adapted from Patrick McCabe's novels.

The Butcher Boy is based on McCabe's 1992 novel of the same name. Both novel and film rely heavily on point-of-view and narration to build a fluid – if manic – depiction of their main character, twelve-year-old Francie Brady (Eamon Owens), who grows up in the early 1960s in the tiny town of Clones, County Monahan, which borders County Fermanagh in the North. This is the town in which the book is set (although in the novel it is referred to as the fictional town of Carn) and where the film was made. Both McCabe and Jordan grew up in the era in which the film takes place – the early 1960s just after the introduction of television to Ireland.³³ Both film and novel concern the troubled life of Francie Brady, who lives in a slum with an abusive, alcoholic father and a mentally unstable mother. His only source of happiness is his friendship with a

³³ The national broadcaster, Radio Telefis Éireann, was established on New Year's Eve, 1961, relatively late by European and North American standards.

neighbour, Joe Purcell (Alan Boyle). Martin McLoone concisely describes their lives together: “both boys live in a fantasy world of adventure and derring-do, fuelled by the images and characters introduced into their lives by the advent of television” (213). Francie’s nemesis is the prudish Mrs. Nugent (Fiona Shaw), who accuses the Brady family of living like pigs. Through a series of misfortunes, including the death of his mother by suicide, his father’s subsequent death of alcohol poisoning and Joe’s budding friendship with the Nugent boy, Philip (Andrew Fullerton), Francie finds himself lost and alone in the world and develops an increasingly deranged sense of the world. Fuelled by the well-meaning but totally inappropriate advice of a recurring vision of the Virgin Mary (Sinéad O’Connor), who comes to him as a vision in the sky, a picture on the wall and even the broken television set in his dilapidated home. This vision of “Our Lady,” as Francie refers to her, resembles the statuette in the hall of the housewife in “Skin” who begins to associate her own body with the Virgin’s sacred glow. As Francie’s life continues to crumble around him, he begins to blame Mrs. Nugent for the break up of the father-mother-son trinity and forms an obsession pitting Mrs. Nugent against Our Lady and himself – yet another trinity of characters. Francie’s anger and despair culminates violently when he murders Mrs. Nugent. The film is narrated by a grown up Francie (Stephen Rea, who also plays Francie’s father), who has spent decades in an asylum and still relies on his visions of “Our Lady” to assure him that the “beautiful things” in the world still exist.

Performance

Performance plays a key role in Jordan’s work, both on the page and on the screen. Many of his films feature performance within performance, and this is often related to music as

in the dancehall jazz band in *Angel*, especially Danny's (Stephen Rea) role as saxophonist and Deirdre's (Honor Hefferman) performance as glamorous singer. Danny's saxophone performances throughout the film provide a musical backdrop for another, more emotional performance and one that Danny cannot fully embrace: that of the vengeful killer. Danny's performance of the role he doesn't really fit into (which is a thin act, at best) masks his deep pain of loss: loss of his home and family, and the death of the mute girl outside the dancehall. The calloused exterior that Rea's character adopts masks a vulnerable emotional interior. This layered performance occurs again and again throughout Jordan's films, particularly in those roles played by Stephen Rea.

In *The Miracle*, the subject of musical performance recurs, this time in the more complex relationship between Jimmy (Niall Byrne) and Renee (Beverly D'Angelo), whom Jimmy only discovers is his mother in the film's last act. Renee, the star performer in this film, is caught between confusing bookends of her stage persona: sexy lounge singer/actor and her double duty of coyly dissuading Jimmy's advances while hiding her maternal identity from him. Her desire to get closer to the boy she knows is her son is hampered by his increasing desire for her sexually and her coincident wish to keep her real identity from him. This confusing web of performance inundates Jimmy's life, as his increasing fantasies of circus acts and duets with his mother attest to. Musical performance is also central to *The Miracle*, in the performances of Sam with his jazz band, and Jimmy as musical accompaniment to Renee. Meanwhile, Jimmy's friend Rose (Lorraine Pilkington), in love with Jimmy but unable to express herself, takes the role of quasi-martyr as she determines to civilize the churlish circus hand by offering her body to

him. Her overly dramatic statement that she will tame the beastly circus worker masks the pain of her unrequited love for Jimmy.

Performance in *The Crying Game* is multi-layered. Aside from the performance of deceit at the start of the film when Jude (Miranda Richardson) lures Jody (Forest Whitaker) into a trap, there is the complex relationship developed between Dil (Jaye Davidson), the transvestite cabaret singer and Fergus (Stephen Rea). Their relationship is founded on what turns out to be a performance, but a performance that conceals a different truth: the extremely feminine Dil is physically a man.

The subject of stage performance is taken one step further in *Interview with the Vampire* during the Grand Guignol sequence. As Louis (Brad Pitt) and Claudia (Kirsten Dunst) look on, horrified, Armand (Antonio Banderas) takes to the stage, a vampire performing as a man performing a vampire for the titillated Parisian audience. His is a truly cunning performance. Armand, pandering to the appetites of bored Parisians, shows the audience what is very real (torture, murder) and passes it off as performance. Once again, the idea of reality masquerading as performance (as in *Shade, The Crying Game*) is of central importance here.

Characters performing roles in Jordan's work – usually on stage – first appears in *The Past*. Rene's mother Una is a well-known actor at the Abbey theatre in Dublin and her daughter follows suit years later as a young woman, touring with a troupe around western Ireland and performing various Shakespearean and Dion Boucicault plays as the

cast and crew all devise ways to conceal her progressing pregnancy.³⁴ The secretly pregnant stage actor is featured again in *Shade*. As a young woman, Nina tours with an impoverished theatre troupe through England and Wales alongside Maggie, a British actor concealing her pregnancy until she gives birth and goes back to the father of the child in Somerset.

The Butcher Boy contains a performance that is the result of aggravated neglect and hardship, manifested as the psychological illness of Francie Brady (Eamonn Owens, Stephen Rea). Francie's rambling, stream-of-consciousness interior monologue and jocular banter with people around the town is a performance masking his deep pain of loss and neglect for the length of the film. Francie, both in his boyish incarnation (Owens) and his adult counterpart (Rea) is never fully in the world – with its stark realities of death and abandonment, violence and cruelty – but, rather, in a version of the world that takes what is seen and experienced and transforms it into one continuous joke. The joke, as Francie is taken further and further from reality by his charming performance of jocular nonchalance, ultimately becomes a warped version of the truth by the end of the film.

Though *In Dreams* provides yet another theatrical performance (the children's performance of *Snow White* on a windswept outdoor stage), the more interesting performance here is that of Vivian (Downey Jr.), whose warped sense of the world we could consider the continuation of Francie Brady's life. After enduring a horrific

³⁴ Boucicault was a nineteenth century Irish playwright. He is perhaps best known for *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) and *The Shaughraun* (1874). In fact, these were all adapted into films in the early 1910s by director Sidney Olcott for the American production company, Kalem. See Ruth Barton, 2004, 19-23.

childhood, Vivian's sense of reality is so wounded that his only escape, like Francie, is to retreat into a version of his childhood that holds more meaning for him than the outside world. Performing child, husband/father and wife/mother, Vivian is able to hold up some semblance of life, the psychosis of which only thinly veils his utterly crushed ego. In order to escape his monstrous reality, Claire (Annette Bening) must adopt its rules, performing abusive mother/wife to the simpering audience of Vivien-as-child. What is, in Vivien's demented mind, a psychotic reality allows Claire the opportunity to flee.

The retreat into performance to escape reality and to subsequently create it anew is clearly a recurring fascination of Jordan's. For the curious and tortured souls who comprise Jordan's various protagonists both in writing and film, it is the act of the performance that has some healing effect, salving their wounded lives. For Bendrix (Rea) in *The End of the Affair*, performance offers no healing power, however temporary, as it simply facilitates the continued denial of his wife's affair and their mutual dissatisfaction. For him, the daily performance of nonchalance and practical distance from his wife, Sarah (Moore), is essential for his emotional survival (which is actually an emotional withdrawal). When finally confronted with the reality of the affair, Bendrix's performance literally crumbles around him and it is his grappling with the pain of defeat and loss that finally enables his taking on an active role towards the end of his wife's life.

Performance in Jordan's films is always more than it seems. The performance of actors playing various emotional roles within each film allows for a layered, deeper exploration of the emotional intent and denial of Jordan's fictional characters. Seen as a continuation of his thematic preoccupation with emotion in his novels and short stories,

Jordan's self-stated interest in and commitment to strong performances within his films is particularly pertinent.

CONCLUSION

Recent work: *Shade* and *Breakfast on Pluto*

Jordan's most recent novel, *Shade*, incorporates many of the themes discussed throughout this study. The novel is partially narrated by a ghost; subsequently, the novel's narration is afforded limitless omniscience, spanning characters, life, death and past, present and future – a trait not previously used in Jordan's writing or film.

In *Shade* Jordan describes with subtlety childhood and adolescence and their corresponding emotions and confusions. *Shade* is a novel of interlocking fantasy and reality; it is a ghostly enunciation of time, chronicling the events within the life of the protagonist, Nina, over the course of half a century. Much of the novel's beginning concerns the childhood of Nina, her half-brother Gregory (who becomes her lifelong love, though the two only once consummate their relationship and never speak a word of it) and their friends Janie and George. At roughly the novel's halfway point, there is a major shift in tone from that of playful childhood to the pain of growing up. From great expectations to loss, love, and the sensuousness of sorrow and the ever more entwined versions of young life with epic myths and sexual awakening when Nina and her longtime friend, George, climb to the top of Maiden's Tower and tumble off it, both enduring weeks of recuperation and emerging from the hospital no longer as children, but rather as young adults:

'It was my fault, Georgie, all mine. We fell, like Icarus, like Lucifer.'

'No,' he said, 'we fell like Adam and Eve.' 'There's wasn't an actual fall,

George, it was more like a fall from grace.’ She said this but she could see the theme was going to stick. Adam and Eve. They alone, among their peers, were of the fallen. They had fallen, moreover, together and ravaged each other’s bodies in the falling. George, whose brief existence had heretofore been lived in the shadow of others, now had his legend, his fall, had tumbled from the Maiden’s Tower with Nina Hardy, had punctured his maiden’s body with his (128).

Performance and the lives of performers in Jordan’s work is a recurring trope and this is no less true of *Shade*, especially as the children (Nina, Gregory, Janie and George) grow into adolescence. Nina particularly absorbs the theatre to simultaneously mask and reveal herself (she says she is only ever really herself on the stage):

Rosalind [of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*], who was not quite her, but more than her, who existed for two brief hours in the glower of the footlights, the whorls of dust raised by their buckled feet, in the smell of stale sweat and greasepaint. But she did not so much exist in those two hours, as become illumined, her existence was a prior fact, endless, and for two brief hours Nina was privileged to give it being. *She acted, that is to say she pretended, and as she pretended, she became.* The rush of feeling Rosalind gave rise to in her moved her at points to tears [...and] here it was, the real, it had been dormant all along, sleeping like Snow White, or like in one of those vampire films...sleeping in the coffin of herself (160, emphasis mine).

The idea that performance allows Nina to become herself is significant and is one that pervades Jordan's work generally. It highlights the import Jordan gives to the performance of emotion and storytelling in his earliest literary works and its evolution with each successive novel and film. In *Shade*, performance allows Nina to access something *more* real than life. In this way, the act becomes more than life itself. Later in the novel, Nina begins to act in silent films, but the effect of these performances is much different: instead of finding truth in performance, Nina finds herself having to lie and conceal herself in a "game of pretense" (Jordan 2005, 267) which, at first, she embraces wholly:

I came to understand those primitive peoples who believed the camera ate the soul, and I wanted it to eat mine whole and entire, and give me back another one, an artificial one that could be eaten in turn by whoever came to view me of an afternoon in a darkened hall when the projector whirled and the image flickered on the white sheet that was the screen. [...] When did I come to hate them, those artificial dramas with their chases, their stunts, their pratfall, their flouncing, sweating period dresses, their simering close-ups, their manufactured mystery and suspense, their light and shade? [...] It was no longer me, moving in the caked make-up, the costumes stiff at the armpits from someone else's sweat. It was her, a person I didn't know anymore, called Nina Hardy (ibid 257, 274).

At the end of the novel, the narrator wonders if everything in her life has been the product of an Abbot's dream during an afternoon nap. The end of the novel casts Nina as one with the folkloric sea-goddess the children were taught about years before, and of the

moment of Nina loses here childhood and her life. The novel ties many of its themes and images together in the end, including the strong connection between water and the cycles of life and death:

There are three of us here, one died by drowning [Boinn], one died by falling [the mythical Maiden of the Maiden's Tower], one died by garden shears [Nina]. We burble sometimes, we lap, we sing. We pray for the living who move above us in ships, for the pilot that guides them, for the harbour that awaits them. For we know that some day they'll have no more existence than us, than the tendrils of our hair on the river bed, moving with the tides, than the horse that wrecked the barley, than the petals of spring cherry that detach themselves from the tree in a monastery garden, drifting downwards towards the bald pate of the bearded Abbot, still sleeping, dreaming of them (317).

In its depiction of childhood and adolescence, its use of Catholic imagery and the Irish landscape, and its association of the sea with women, life and death, *Shade* illustrates Jordan's primary thematic concerns in fiction writing have remained largely those first developed in his early publications. In the beginning of his book, *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kilberd notes that "the Irish writer has always been confronted with a choice. This is the dilemma of whether to write for the native audience – a risky, often thankless task – or to produce texts for consumption in Britain and North America" (136). In fact, more than any other Irish filmmaker, Jordan is known for producing both blockbusters and lower-budget films and, because they usually appeal to human emotion and diverse experiences of the world, are appropriate for local and international audiences alike.

Jordan has described himself as a lapsed Catholic, a tenuous religious affiliation that is quite clearly on display in his work and which is particularly apparent in his most recent film, *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005). The film is narrated Patrick “Kitten” Braden (Cillian Murphy), an Irish boy from the fictional Irish town of Tyreelin (bordering Northern Ireland) during the Troubles. The film’s first act chronicles Patrick’s life, from his illegitimate birth to housekeeper and a Catholic priest, to his adoption by a haggard publican (Ruth McCabe) to his adolescence and his adoption of the name “Kitten”: he becomes a transvestite as a teenager after declaring one day to the priest at his Catholic school that he is to be referred to no longer as Patrick, but rather as Kitten (after Saint Cettin), explaining “some have been known to call him....or was it a her...kitten.” Patrick stands out as a “disgrace” in the Catholic town of Tyreelin, particularly according to his adoptive mother. Patrick learns that his father is the town’s own Father Bernard (Liam Neeson). Feeling more and more out of place and constantly wondering about his birth mother, he leaves for London where his mother is rumoured to have gone after leaving him on Father Bernard’s doorstep as a baby. While in London, he is unable to find his mother and resorts to prostitution to make ends meet. Along the way he meets several interesting characters – most of them performers: Billy Hatchett (Gavin Friday) is a member of a band touring around Ireland with whom Kitten falls briefly in love (even going so far as to join Hatchett’s band, Billy Hatchett and the Mohawks, as a “squaw” back-up singer). Kitten also meets the temperamental Irishman John-Joe (Brendan Gleeson) in London. John-Joe works as a mascot for a “Wombles of Wimbledon” children’s park and hires Kitten, who gamely dons a huge “womble” costume and lopes around dancing for children in a section of the film called “Fairy Tale.”³⁵ Kitten then

³⁵ Emer and Kevin Rockett describe a job Jordan had as a young man touring with a children’s theatre

meets Bertie (Stephen Rea), a mediocre musician with whom he falls in love and becomes a part of his act (his “lovely assistant”). In all of these encounters, Kitten is drawn to men who perform (in various capacities) and he performs with them while searching for his mother and while “performing” as a prostitute at night. While out one night, the club he’s dancing in is bombed by members of the IRA. The police who pull him from the wreckage and discover that he is a man under his nylons and mini-skirt suspect him to have disguised himself as a woman in order to plant the bomb, especially upon hearing his Irish accent. Kitten, who refers to politics as “serious, serious, serious,” and couldn’t be less interested in the state of Northern Ireland, is held for six days by the London police (Ian Hart and Steven Waddington), who interrogate him and ultimately try to beat a confession out of him. It eventually becomes clear that Kitten is uninvolved in the attack and meanwhile, he has come to take comfort in his cell and interrogators, begging to stay on as a prisoner so he can feel like he belongs somewhere. The police detectives release him and, with the help of Wallis (Hart), Kitten eventually joins a woman-run peepshow in London which is where Father Bernard finds him and tells him where he can find his mother. After a nerve-wracking meeting with his birth mother (he disguises himself as a woman collecting surveys for the local telephone company), Kitten comes to terms with the fact that his mother has moved on with her life and that, in the meantime, he has moved on as well. He returns to Tyreelin when he hears news that his childhood friend, Irwin (Laurence Kinlan) has been killed by the IRA as an informer. Charlie (Ruth Negga), Irwin’s partner and Patrick’s best friend, is pregnant and Kitten returns to help her get past the grief. Father Bernard takes both Charlie and Kitten into his

troupe: he was “dressed as a fish [...] in ‘a skin-tight leotard with a fish’s head [...] playing a saxophone” (4). This strange performance appears to have directly influenced the scene in *Breakfast on Pluto* described above – it is not a part of McCabe’s novel.

home – causing great scandal amongst the townspeople, who cannot believe their priest has taken in a pregnant single mother and the transvestite son most of the town now recognize as Father Bernard's own child. In a thrilling climax, the furious townspeople burn down Father Bernard's house and the attached church while the threesome – yet another unconventional family unit within Jordan's oeuvre – sleeps. Father Bernard pulls Kitten and Charlie from the flames to safety. Jordan's familial trinity– a Catholic priest, his son the transvestite, and Charlie, the unwed mulatto mother – are condemned by the hypocritically "Catholic" townspeople who burn down their own church to show how disgusted they are. The imagery of the destroyed church is very much like Jordan's underwater church in *In Dreams* and Jordan's characteristic testing of boundaries seems to be personified in these characters.

Described by the *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden as "delightfully subversive,"³⁶ the film seems to relish in the landscape of Jordanian themes and images with the added rarity of tongue-in-cheek comedy, meandering as it does through Kitten's rose-tinted version 1960s and 70s current events in Ireland and Britain via and a the protagonist's flighty, hallucinogenic romp through the era's popular culture. The film has also been described in reviews as falling somewhere between *The Crying Game* – which also takes as one of its central characters a transvestite and is also set during the Troubles – and *The Butcher Boy*, Jordan's first adaptation from McCabe's novel of the same name. While *Breakfast on Pluto* most certainly possesses many of the narrative strategies, themes and imagery so characteristic of Jordan's oeuvre, it is in many ways unlike anything the director has made before and suggests Jordan is moving into new creative terrain while retaining those features he is most fascinated with. By employing the traditional Irish

³⁶ Stephen Holden, NYT, 16 November, 2005.

imagery – the small devoutly Catholic Irish town, in the case of *Breakfast on Pluto* – and then subverting that imagery by warping its context or use (the burning church and the unusual family of Father Bernard, Kitten and Charlie are not the typical, traditional elements within representations of Ireland on screen and in print), Jordan has created a truly dynamic, sometimes ballistic, landscape of characters, settings and plots. In her article “Neil Jordan’s *Miracle*,” Kathleen Gallagher Winarski states that

Neil Jordan grapples with the great ghosts of Ireland’s past, but he is not intimidated by Irish tradition. Rather, Jordan explores Irish literature and culture as an artist who challenges tradition to express and to enrich his own vision, which is rooted in his past, but headed toward a future that will, by its nature, push the artist beyond all boundaries (98).

This exploration certainly applies to Jordan’s Irish work, but the idea that his work straddles double concerns – with past and future, the locally specific and the general or universal, with myth and reality – applies to his occupation as a whole, as this study has shown. Gallagher Winarski’s testament to Jordan’s straddling of two worlds is in keeping with Emer and Kevin Rockett’s contention of Jordan’s envelope-pushing and with my own assertion in this study’s introduction that Jordan straddles two tendencies, equally fascinated by Irish symbolism and Celtic mythology as he is by the redefinition of Irish culture with a cast of characters who test the limits and force us to question traditional definitions of family, Catholic piety and the influence of the landscape and politics on people’s lives. Gallagher Winarski further notes that *Night in Tunisia and Other Stories* contains

a style that is Jordan's own. Marked by his skill as a filmmaker, the stories are spare, visual, tactile – sensual but remote, set in landscapes that mirror the alienation and sensitivity of their protagonists. [...] Although Jordan deals with themes familiar in Irish fiction – the repression of the individual by Irish culture and the Catholic Church and the emotional deprivation in Irish family life – there are glimmers of hope in his stories as his characters' fears and disappointments are sometimes resolved in friendship, the love of music, or in the reconciliation of parents and children (99).

I do not necessarily agree with Gallagher Winarski's assertion of the ultimate hope in Jordan's first published writing – more often these stories are bleak; characters are left unsure of themselves ("Tree", "Outpatient", "Skin", "Her Soul"), unnoticed ("Mr Solomon Wept"), betrayed ("Sand") and dead ("Last Rites"). Her observation regarding Jordan's reworking of traditional Irish imagery, however, is astute and this departure from the traditional has hopefully been addressed in the preceding pages. Particularly with regard to Jordan's latest film, her assertion of the intrinsic hopefulness of Jordan's work is fitting. As an artist, Jordan has successfully straddled two media, though as a writer he works within a milieu with a longer-standing tradition, one more immediately recognizable as 'Irish' while nonetheless individualistic. From an early stage in his career, a distinctive voice emerges; particularly in the *Night in Tunisia* collection, as well as *The Past* and *The Dream of a Beast*, themes and imagery are developed and then return in his subsequent work in writing and filmmaking. It is this development of similar themes in Jordan's work that defines him as an artist and storyteller and gives a strong

sense of fluidity and continuation throughout his work, though the genre he works in may vary wildly.

The need to go against the grain – a kind of tragic, contrary solitude – exists within most of Jordan's work, for who among his heroes are agreeable, compliant, or even social in the end? I would argue that Jordan's protagonists are solitary in their tangled emotions, their distrust of others, their inability to feel anything but alone despite trying to fit in, to love, to be loved. Ultimately, these protagonists are alone, despite persistent searches for meaningful relationships and love. And yet they share a place in a rich universe of fictions that straddle both literature and film. The common threads running through Jordan's fiction writing and his cinema include a focus on the personal and emotional, a strong attachment to the Irish landscape and character relationships – especially in groups of three – as well as a fascination with Catholic imagery, influence of the Church on his character's lives and the effect of politics – and particularly violent political struggle – on his character's lives. He has proved to be particularly interested in the depiction of childhood and parenting, specifically when the relationships developed therein diverge somehow from the commonplace. Jordan's most recent novel and film are resonant with the themes and concerns with all of his work, from his earliest literary efforts to his most recent filmmaking.

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