

Alice McDermott's Use of Metaphor in *Child of my Heart*

In his autobiography *Finders Keepers*, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney traces his profound imagination to a simple source—a foreign word, and its seemingly accidental resonance with a youthful memory of Ireland. He looks inward and writes, “I would begin with the Greek word *omphalos*, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the center of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos*, *omphalos*, *omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It’s County Derry in the early 1940’s” (qtd. in Hecht, 207). *Omphalos*. Not even of the English language, the poet revels in the sheer rhythm of the word, and literally unmoors it from its original meaning. And yet ironically, this passage truly delves into the very idea of the Greek word: *the center of the world*. The young poet attunes his ear and his heart to the humble water pump.

By defining and then juxtaposing *omphalos* with a familiar sound of pumping water, Heaney emphasizes that words reverberate beyond mere abstractions. When used poetically and subtly, they become instant conduits; away from abstract ideas and toward deep memory, with its attendant places, people, and emotions. Heaney immerses the reader in an idea, left unsaid due to its breadth and intricacy: words subvert the imagination and create their own reality and time. Chanting the word *omphalos*, the poet literally hurtles back into the past and makes it present. In truth, this entire passage works as a metaphor, defined by the art theorist Rudolf Arnheim as a parallel implicitly drawn between abstract ideas and the palpable world. Metaphors ease readers into ideas that otherwise seem too elusive to grasp. Arnheim succinctly illustrates metaphor: “Profundity of mind...is named in English by a word that contains the Latin *fundus*; ie., bottom.

The depth of a well and depth of thought are described by the same word even today” (Arnheim 232). A reader, in other words, understands the nature of the word *profound* by thinking of a deep water well.

Child of My Heart, a novel by Alice McDermott, draws upon metaphor with the quiet insistence of prose instead of poetry. Theresa, the first person narrator and a gifted storyteller herself, recounts a youthful past similar to Heaney’s. Her fifteenth summer, spent in 1950’s Long Island, propels forward not by a water pump and its sound, but by other prosaic sights and forms. Certain images persist through the book and seem imbued with unsaid meaning: baby rabbits; a child’s cellophane-wrapped clothes, and a pair of jeweled shoes; dark bruises, lapping oceans, a summer sun setting. The novel opens with an image of baby rabbits in a box, almost fetal in appearance: “They were wet and blind, curled up like grubs and wrapped in a kind of a gray caul—so small it was difficult to know if their bodies moved with the beating of their hearts or the rise of their breaths. Not meant to live, as my parents had told me...” (McDermott 1)

Even though this box of baby rabbits lands on Theresa’s back steps at the end of the summer—the end of the narrative’s chronology—McDermott chooses to open the novel with it. She suspends this image over all of the following pages, with the creatures’ tiny hearts beating, alive but barely lingering. They are faint beings, not meant to survive alone in a daunting world. By opening with an image, McDermott adheres to a common novelistic technique. She invokes the idea of innocence lost not through intellect, but intimate emotion. In *The Writer’s Chronicle*, an article about metaphor elucidates McDermott’s dying baby rabbits with an uncanny example. The author believes, “We can conceptualize the abstract, immaterial idea of dying wildlife, but we can’t stand over it the way we can the dead tiger...Beginning a story with an idea like ‘dying wildlife,’ then, with an abstraction, seems obviously problematic if we consider, as Flannery

O'Connor writes in *Mystery and Manners*, 'that the beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer must begin where human perception begins'"(Fitzgerald 12).

An opening image compels the reader to keep reading by appealing to the senses and to emotion, more mysterious and involving realms than cerebral, abstract intellect. In McDermott's opening paragraph, the reader suffers with the narrator; we feel the compassion inherent in an image of tiny, helpless animals. *The Writer's Chronicle* explains why this opening metaphoric paragraph is so effective in terms of theme. "Readers don't really want to know more than that which they have the capacity to feel, particularly when a writer enables them to feel something in their bones" (20). At first, in a very conventional way, McDermott seems to simply re-visit one of fiction's most frequented themes. A box of dying rabbits is a metaphor for innocence doomed, too good for this world.

As Heaney juxtaposed the word *omphalos*, the Greek center of the world, with the water pump, McDermott parallels dying baby rabbits with Daisy. The narrator introduces her to the reader in the paragraph immediately following the metaphoric opener. Even before McDermott characterizes Daisy, readers unconsciously hear the echo of still-beating but doomed hearts. The reader infers that Daisy, also in Theresa's temporary care, might share the baby rabbits' inevitable fate. Her clothes are "wrapped in cellophane," (McDermott 1) iridescent and fragile, almost otherworldly; her skin, translucent (2) and glowing (25).

Later, McDermott suggests the baby rabbit's fitful pulse as a sort of chorus to Daisy, "I could hear Daisy's heartbeat in my ear, I could hear the quick, lively rhythm of it against the more stately sound of the ocean" (166). This passage mirrors the opening paragraph, and contrasts two opposing metaphors, the heartbeat of an intimate, mortal life, against the eternal, unchanging "sound of the ocean." The other child in her care, Flora, has a similar ephemeral,

even unborn quality to her. Theresa delves underwater with her, and says, “I looked at her to see she was looking at me, eyes wide open, face serene, pale hair floating...angelic and human, iridescent...” (117) The children seem to embody an idea of purity and innocence, so at odds with the dust and decay of reality.

Even their names are metaphors: “Daisy” and “Flora” evoke flowers; a new, temporal life of spring. Theresa also springs from a sympathetic vantage point. She is named after “Saint Theresa of the Little Flower” (13), and she says, “Daisy’s birthday, like mine, was in April...” (200) Daisy herself is portrayed as an almost mythological Flora, “the clover chains were still on her head, the fading flowers still stuck in her hair” (133). With almost a whisper, again McDermott pairs Daisy with the haunting opening image—Theresa feeding the dying rabbits torn clovers. Daisy has the appearance of a sprig, slight and fragile, and again the reader intuitively pairs her with the rabbits in passages like this, “...I had a funny recollection of Petey’s rabbit trap in the yard—of the thin twig he used to prop up the cardboard box, of something slight and fragile holding back the weighty darkness” (158). Read metaphorically, these images and words permeate with spring, birth and innocence, and intensify as the narration moves languidly through the summer, the season most tangibly filled with warmth and life. The reader should dread the end of summer as if entering a rabbit trap.

Seasons have inherent metaphoric meaning. Spring intuitively brings to mind birth; summer, life; fall and winter, decay and then death. The reader knows the box of doomed baby rabbits arrives in August, the end of summer, and Daisy will soon part from Theresa’s care in Long Island. Maxine Clare’s novel *October Suite* spells out the universality of seasonal metaphors in its first paragraph. Of the fall, the omniscient narrator says, “...this season has a

natural pathos to it, the brief and flaming brilliance of everything at the climax of life moving toward death. October Brown had named herself for all of that” (Clare 1).

McDermott certainly understands that the metaphors of death and innocence lost may seem too familiar to readers, who may already intuitively know her well-trodden techniques of opening metaphor and seasonal metaphor. Though the story has a classic feel, McDermott is simply too sophisticated not to layer it with more idiosyncratic subtlety, mystery, and meaning. For this reason, near the beginning of the novel, even as the narrator sounds her most ominous note yet, she includes a surprising caveat: “I have until now kept out of this account and even mostly, out of my own recollection, the fall and winter that awaited poor Daisy, because while it may be the end point of this particular story, it is not, after all, the reason I tell it...”(38) Until this moment, the reader could be forgiven for thinking this was a story about poor, doomed Daisy, a flower “not meant to live” in the chilling fall. But with this interjection, the real mystery of the story briefly blooms: Why is the narrator telling this story, if it is not truly about Daisy and her fate? What is this story really about?

In its review of *Child of my Heart*, *The New York Review of Books* concludes that the story is not even about the narrator, but rather about an idea—imagination and the power of storytelling to re-order time and reality. It notes that the reader learns nothing about the narrator after the end of the summer and the many years that have passed since; instead, the reader gleans solely from her sophisticated voice that she is probably devoted to literary endeavors. The voice exhales from a “spell weaver,” and “Theresa wants nothing less than to reverse time, and to bring Daisy back from the dead” (Atwood 28). Theresa notes with understated irony that Daisy dies in spring, the season of her birth, and that the family’s other storyteller, Uncle Tommy, chose to see life even here. “In March she left us...Uncle Tommy was visiting us when the long expected

phone call came, and he was the first to point out (determined to be happy) that she had left us in the Season of the Resurrection, the beginning of spring” (McDermott 241). The narrator characterizes Uncle Tommy as a tad hapless and detached, in his loneliness and outlandish stories of ghosts in the attic. Yet in Uncle Tommy she feels the kinship of a storyteller. The true resurrection begins in a storyteller’s selective memory and imagination.

The New York Review of Books article delves further into Theresa’s present desire to tell stories: “you can write a story about a dead child who is not yet dead, and thus have Daisy live again in an eternal summer of your own concoction, and hope things don’t get too maudlin, and that the spell will hold” (Atwood 28). The article’s author believes this novel is primarily metaphorical, working “through oblique reference and pattern and symbolism as much as through observed detail” (28). This is not a story of undiluted realism. All observed details filter through the reflective storyteller, who may imbue them with meaning or heighten them in retrospect. Here, the reader wanders into a more extended and personal metaphor for imagination, like the dark woods and the water pump of Dante and Seamus Heaney. But McDermott writes in prose, and her novel must have a veneer of realism to seduce the reader.

For the novel to still feel convincing, the metaphors about storytelling’s power must remain an undercurrent for the given metaphoric themes of death and innocence lost. Storytelling, an art form, seems to relate to the jewels sprinkled throughout the novel—from stories of baby tears plucked from cheeks and affixed to shoes like Daisy’s (232) to observed sunsets, “the dark jewel of the approaching evening” (122). The jewels have an initial visceral edge, shaped by images of children’s tears and bruises worn like jewelry. Petey, the neglected and unruly boy who seems to have a crush on Daisy, hits her on the arm. Later he gives the box of dying baby rabbits to Theresa, trying to express his love in inadequate, frustrated, and

ultimately painful ways. Oddly, the bruise could be seen as one of his patent “gifts gone awry” (242). Theresa observes that, “Petey’s bruise was a dark brooch on her shoulder” (126).

But these jewel metaphors also have a sexual quality. After Theresa loses her virginity, she feels “a dark, sharp jewel” of pain at her center (227). McDermott explains the jewel imagery only on the last page of her novel, and uses a simile to define the recurring metaphor: Petey would “be plagued all his life by anger and affection...by the irreconcilable difference between what he got and what he longed for, by the inevitable, insufferable loss buried like a dark jewel at the heart of every act of love” (242). The dark jewel is life’s painful gift. Jewels are beautiful metaphors for ended days, salty tears, pain, blood, and bruises. They are the raw material of life.

For Theresa, only art and storytelling can defy life’s encroaching pain. Theresa knows her imaginative powers also exist within Flora’s father, an artist whose modest fame and very life seem to ebb away with each glass of downed scotch. He is almost an apparition, a tongue-like flicker of smoke, “An old man shuffling a bit in his soft shoes, his white hair rising off his head, his white shirt moving in and out as if it were his breath, with the beating of his heart; moving, in truth, with the buffeting wind” (219). Even his studio seems ephemeral: “The pale, enchanted light of the studio, where he painted, suddenly struck me as imaginary...a fanciful antidote to what was real and solid and inevitable” (231). She sleeps with him in this space of imagination, trying to somehow siphon off his secret knowledge of the unreal.

Throughout the novel, she refuses to succumb to the old man’s wily sexual advances, but asserts her complicity in their ultimate coupling—an equal partner despite the yawning difference in their ages. When they sleep together, canvases primed for the painter’s imagination surround them. Theresa is interested in the notion of an old man living more in his world than the agreed world of reality, and this admitted interest could even cast doubt on the verisimilitude of

the story's observed details. Could they all be metaphors, their meanings heightened or created from the ether by the storyteller? The paintings are certainly metaphors for the ideas—memory and the imagination—inherent in Theresa's weave of words. "I turned to look at the other painting," she said, "which had no images at all, a blur of paint. Scribble out the world since it was not to your liking and make up a new one...something better" (134).

Child of my Heart re-imagines a Long island summer and a little girl whose time has already passed, a perfect innocent who lived in this world all too briefly. The novel's structure supports and accentuates the obvious metaphors of death and innocence lost, and the less obvious metaphors, life's beautiful pain and the power of imagination to defy it. Lacking chapters, and relying only rarely on white-space pauses or jumps, the story reads like a series of prolonged exhalations. McDermott allows no exit from the enchanted space of her story. In the stream of this story, the repeated use of names like Daisy and Flora jostle with a subtler and darker recurrence of metaphor, the dark jewels that symbolize life's difficult gifts. The story's true mystery lives in the paintings and the scribbled, torn-up drawings that litter the old artist's house and studio—and how Theresa interprets them metaphorically. The paintings, even when blank and ugly, are inspired imagination. In the artist's imagination, only life exists, even in the emptiest and darkest corners of memory.

Here structure and metaphor work in silent harmony. The story is not only a memory of fragile innocence, but also a flashback within that memory. The story opens with the summer's end, and the image of dying baby rabbits, and then shifts back to June and July. By the final paragraph, Theresa, the gifted storyteller, has cleverly led the reader back to the beginning; of the rabbits, she says, "I gently lifted the hopeless little things, still breathing, into the nest of torn

grass” (242). The metaphor of innocence lost encircles the novel, but within its borders, Daisy lives as if in her own nest of words.

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