

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

AUGUST 2019 VOL.10, ISSUE - IV

10th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Technique of Recollection of Memories in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*

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Article History: Submitted-15/06/2019, Revised-06/08/2019, Accepted-07/08/2019, Published-10/09/2019.

Abstract:

Anne Enright is an Irish writer of international stature. Her Man Booker Prize winning novel, *The Gathering* illustrates Irish Literary traditions with a combination of old and new. The novel not only mirrors the long-term effect of memories on the human psyche but also questions their veracity. The recollections of the past life drawn by the protagonist of the novel, Veronica Hegarty years later to analyze a critical situation affect her psyche and change the mode of her present life. As she recalls the past incidents, she notices things more deeply and comprehends them with her present mature outlook. This Postmodern approach of recalling the past and analyzing it with a present situation is well-scripted in the narrative by Enright and demands a strong analysis. The technique helps in developing a connection in the plot structure and understand the psychology of the characters to their deepest core.

Keywords: recollections, reconstructive memory, mnemonic devices, self-reflexivity, human identity.

Anne Enright, an acclaimed Irish writer and novelist, has to her credit five novels, short stories and books of non-fiction. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1991, her short story collection, *The Portable Virgin* was awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. Her other two collections of stories are *Taking Pictures* and *Yesterday's Weather*. Her novels reflect the culture of Ireland with themes comprising of family relationships, love, sex, emotional attachments, motherhood and feminism blended with the Irish traditions. Her fourth novel, *The Gathering* is a highly acclaimed one and winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2007. She was also proclaimed as the inaugural Laureate for Irish Fiction in January 2015. *The Gathering* delivers a strong storyline based on memories, love, disappointment

and frustrations. It is a daring epic and a family saga of the Hegarty clan of Ireland. It most importantly portrays the past of Ireland and its modern “spirit of the age”, *Zeitgeist*. The novel captures the culture of the surviving generations who with their sprightly nature are fighting with the odds of the past. Enright had described the book, *The Gathering* as “.....the intellectual equivalent of a Hollywood weepie.”

Enright has been an important spokesperson of the Irish culture. She stands up defiantly for a change in the societal structure of Ireland and advocates for the Irish women to stand up and establish their own identity. As stated by Laura Sydora, “Enright makes the personal political by tracing three generations of Hegarty women from post-independence to the Celtic Tiger in order to re-envision the archaeology of motherhood in Ireland.” The dark storyline of *The Gathering* with an intense first-person narrative combined with a flash-back technique portrays the problems and crisis developed due to repeated pregnancies and motherhood. The novel also reflects the identity-crisis of the characters and the perils of unaware, innocent childhood in the backdrop of Irish culture and societal traditions. The story revolves around the narrator-protagonist, Veronica Hegarty and her recollections of her brother, Liam's life who died due to suicide. She is the eighth of the twelve children of her mother and is a woman of Irish origin.

The art of characterization used in *The Gathering* by Anne Enright reveals both the past and the present myriad characteristic traits of all the characters. The novelist has used direct characterization with Veronica as the protagonist which explicitly describes all the characters. In the narrative, she is more often found caught up in memories ‘recollecting’ than living in the present. Her ‘recollections’ are a bid to support her in ‘gathering’ facts and motives behind Liam’s suicide. Enright's *The Gathering* has been the topic of many types of researches against the framework of feminism, post-colonial feminism (Lilienthal, 2013), psychoanalysis (Gardam, 2009), individualism and cultural trauma (Oddenino, 2011) and many other thematic aspects. *The Gathering* exemplifies a desire to investigate the contemporary societal change in an effort to recover what has been silenced in Ireland's public historiography, particularly female identity (Sydora, 2015). In a specific research by Ralf Haekal (2016), the novel is analyzed as “.....first and foremost a work of trauma fiction dealing with the repercussions of sexual abuse.” Ilaria Oddenino (2011) has added on to this by stating that *The Gathering* is about a person’s death and the ‘wake’ that

follows and is a broader framework of an established literary tradition, as an Irish novel that revolves around a 'wake'. The novel also highlights the themes of 'memories', 'relationship', 'death' and 'family secrets'. As a novelist, Enright never fails to surprise her readers with her innovative plotline combined with a distinguished prose style.

Picking up the past to 'recollect' and to search for an 'identity' based on it in the present scenario has been a technique long followed and is undoubtedly a strong force in an explicitly developed fictitious narrative. The flashback technique to 'recollect the past' along with a first-person limited point-of-view always render an advantageous situation to a narrative. This technique of 'recollection' has been used largely by the modern writers to develop the characters widely and to expose them explicitly to the readers with relevance to the present scenario. The 'past' is reinvented to represent and understand the 'present' more genuinely. In *The Gathering*, Anne Enright has fittingly developed the technique of 'recollection' in an intensely complicated narrative and represented the 'old' and 'weak' Irish culture. Along with it, the narrative of the acclaimed novel reflects the philosophy of 'forgiving' and 'resurrection' as is dominant in the Irish culture. Her novel stands a protest against the 'orthodox' societal traditions of Ireland which are barriers to the development in the 'wake' of the economic boom. The storyline chiefly focuses on the protagonist, Veronica Hegarty's search for her identity amidst the chaos of a dysfunctional family and society.

As the story of *The Gathering* evolves, the plotline moves with Veronica and focuses on her 'internal' conflict. With her brother, Liam's suicide, she encounters a deep emotional and psychological crisis in her own life. Enright had used her agile genius to depict the psychological struggle of Veronica who is trying to cope up with the loss of her brother. The loss of a sibling and the psychological struggle exposes Veronica to the 'hard truth' of the past. She remembers the 'callousness' of her mother as she neglected the younger children due to her repeated pregnancies and constant miscarriages. Veronica feels it and asserts it as "roaring inside" her. The situation leads to the shifting of the three younger children to their grandmother, Ada Merriman's house in Broadstone, which eventually ends up making their lives more confused and messed up. Veronica recalls the incidents that had happened during their stay in their grandmother's house in the late 1960s. Possibly the 'fateful' incidents

that took place there had laid the foundation of Liam's after events of life. The 'powerful' reminiscences bring her back to their dark and mysterious past. She is found gasping for breath in the midst of the recollections which reveal to her the real cause that might have been behind Liam's suicide. While recollecting and reliving the past, the occasional and episodic memories encountered by Veronica prove fatal to her as she slowly becomes a stranger 'alienated' in her own present world. The fictive memoir progresses through her parents' fecund sensitivity, the Hegarty clan and also her own family who fail to understand and share her despairs. Her present, mature mind eventually questions the importance and validity of her own episodic memories. She starts doubting the authenticity of her own memory and begins emphasizing on their fallibilities. Her uncertainty about the recollection of the incidents makes her more intrigue. "Between Veronica's over-detailed reconstructions of her family's vicissitudes and her uncertain, almost hallucinatory memories of past events that may or may not have happened, there is indeed a chapter of the moral history of contemporary Ireland" (Oddenino, 2011). Every crisis in Veronica's life intensifies as she analyzes her present life to the core by reliving the past. Enright has highlighted the significance and effect of 'memories' in the novel and proved that they are 'anchors' to human identity.

The title of the novel, *The Gathering* signifies the 'gathering' of the Hegarty clan for Liam's funeral. In the novel, Enright has captured the absolute side-effects of Irish Economic boom in the post-independence era. Recollections are positive as well as negative. But Veronica could recollect only the negative memories of her and Liam's childhood. Her mind recollects her grandmother, Ada Merriman only as a 'whore'. The narrative flashback commences with the chapter where Veronica remembers her grandfather, Charlie Spillane. The recollections bring forth the introduction of Lambert Nugent who was Charlie's best friend and landlord for many years. The narrative further hints at Nugent's possible incestuous relationship with his own sister, Lizzy. Veronica further analyzes her grandmother Ada's relationship with Lambert in spite of being married to Charlie Spillane. Veronica recollects that Lambert had never left Ada and was "the dour narcissism of the ordinary man". She recalls how Ada used to fondly call Lambert Nugent - "Nolly May". The religious aspects in *The Gathering* cannot be ignored as some episodes in the novel feature the Catholic Christian sentiments. This is evident from Veronica's imagination which

makes her believe that the personal transformation of their grandmother, Ada had taken place in the Easter of 1925. As a result of which she has chosen Charlie Spillane over Lambert Nugent. Veronica's recollection of her childhood is poignantly described by the novelist with a tint of suspense and doubt involved in it. She bears the painful testimony of witnessing the childhood sexual abuse of her brother, Liam in their grandmother's house by Lambert Nugent. She recollects that at the age of eight she was also being sexually abused by Nugent. Veronica explains it as a "forgotten memory" but still makes Ada responsible for this act. "This is the moment when we realize that it was Ada's fault all along." Their grandmother's house was supposed to be a safe haven for them but had turned out to be a place of silent abuse. On her way to Brighton from Dublin, Veronica imagines that Ada knew about Lambert's perverse nature.

With Liam's death, Veronica feels, "I am the one who has lost something that cannot be replaced." Having lost her favourite brother, she staggers and is psychologically alienated from her own family and children. Her resentment towards her own insensitive parents, recollections of her past, reliving her childhood with Liam and his sexual molestation make her an alienated persona who fails to connect with her world. Her feeling of "Godlessness" reveals her psychic belief in the absence of God. Her helplessness makes her feel guilty of the "irreversible damage" done in childhood in their grandmother's house. Veronica's realization of the fact that nothing can change now makes her more psychologically depressed and frustrated.

The writing technique and the narrative stylistic features of modern literature had helped the authors to create a strong storyline. It virtually aids the authors to fictionalize the experiences of the trauma of the fictitious characters in relation to their past events. The representation of traumatic moments of anxiety, depressive moments in novelistic form and structure helps to seek the root cause of it in the past events. When the past and present is brought together in a fictitious narrative, it helps the readers to understand the difference in the two situations of a character's life. 'Memory', 'trauma' and 'dissociations' are always interrelated. 'Recollecting the past' is a suggestive therapeutic technique which heals the traumatic experiences. Memories are linked to places, persons, situations and events. Enright's *The Gathering* anthologizes the traumatic recalling of memories by Veronica and emphasizes it as a process of re-discovery. The character of Liam is portrayed

indirectly in the recalling of Veronica's memories. His inability to develop a happy relationship with his girlfriend and failure to be happy with his sister Veronica's good, satisfying life in the present confirms yet another point of his psychic problem developed by his childhood circumstances. The focus is drawn towards the internal conflict of the protagonist-narrator, Veronica and occasionally towards the internal psychosis of Liam. His death has opened a 'can of worms' and a series of past events which metaphorically represents the old orthodox culture of Ireland. Liam's episode is epitomized as a metaphor for the rampant sexual abuse of children in Ireland and signified as a matter of national concern.

In Brighton, Veronica has to wait for at least ten days to get the possession of Liam's corpse. As she waits to get the possession of her brother's body, she also recollects the days of her college when she had an affair with Michael Weiss. With these recollections, the passivity of the situations makes her imagine and reimagine the bygone events. The psychosis makes her realize the mechanism of events which she didn't understand when they were happening in her earlier days. Her recalling of the happy memories with Liam made her feel happy. Their time together in their childhood had brought them together closer as siblings and share their feelings with each other. Veronica's spending her time with Liam in the forest through the grove of beech trees "gray and bright" is poignantly explained by Enright with Irish colour and accent. Her use of universal symbols in the storyline ensures the multiple meanings the metaphors denote. The use of the word 'bone' explains the in-depth relevance to the 'past' as well as the 'present'. As Veronica remembers, "Like all boys, he loved the bones of dead animals." Just like the 'bones', the memories also remain forever. Yet, the question on the reliability of the 'memories' remains as Veronica 'doubts' herself and her own memory. Recovery of the past wounds are never possible but the memories provide a base to understand the present more emphatically. Frederic Barlett in his famous work, *War of the Ghosts* had eulogized the constructive nature of memory. According to him, "A memory is constructive when a person gives his opinion about what had happened in the memory, along with additional influences such as their experiences, knowledge and expectations." His findings suggest that the passage of time results in a loss of detail, as memories become simplified and distorted while retaining the core elements, or gist, of the story.

Remembering disjoint things of the past is nevertheless a tedious task which involves going through the tedious roads of memory. Contrary to reverse chronology, flashbacks involve sequences moving from ascending to descending order. When painful memories resurface, they help an individual in processing the present crisis. Memory and mnemonic devices are techniques that help in encoding and recalling important information. As it is famously analyzed, “Memory is usually considered in the light of its more evocative or emotional mode, such as nostalgia- a laudatory temporis acti.” Any sort of memory retrieval brings with it an effective factor which can be positive as well as negative. The memories which are lost with the passage of time bring with them activities and events associated with them. The memory content retrieved impacts the recaller. To analyze the psychology of the recaller, the impact either long-term or short-term can be negative or positive. Veronica’s recalling of the incidents that happened in her grandmother’s house may not be accurate. She doubts the credibility of her own memory and vagueness of it. Her doubts never let her confirm the fact of Liam’s becoming a victim. The authenticity of dreams depends upon the force and depth of the memories recollected. As Veronica says, “but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event.” “I lay them out in nice sentences, all my clean, white bones.” “Then I erase it.” As she asserts, “All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns.” The question of female subjectivity comes to the surface as Veronica doubts the reality and reliability of her own memory.

The Gathering is a distinguished novel and Anne Enright’s use of the ‘memory’ technique brings back the dark past of the two children of the Hegarty family, Veronica and Liam. The incidents in the novel reveal shocking facts of what had happened in the societal setup of Catholic Irish society. Enright’s *The Gathering* represents a progressive awakening of the orthodox Irish society against widespread child abuse and domestic violence. Catholicism in Ireland faced a severe blow and had undergone a crisis against the forces of modernized setup. As the narrative oscillates from present to past and back to present, the recollections diagnose the past to justify Liam’s psychic state of mind and suicide in the present setup. The technique has made its place in novels, narratives and even in poetry with modernist writers relentlessly experimenting the facts.

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