

# Mind Style and Characterization in John McGahern's *The Dark*

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**Abstract**— *The aim of this paper is to offer an in-depth analysis of John McGahern's critical statements on the Irish society of the mid 1960s. This is carried out by combining the notions of mind style (Semino, 2002), split selves (Emmot, 2002) and the blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner, 1994, 2002). The description of two of the main characters of the novel (Mahoney, a widower, and Father Gerald, a priest) and two of the most relevant scenes (the Corpus Christi procession and the young protagonist's sexual arousal with an advert torn from a newspaper) are analysed in terms of multiple metonymic correspondences which interact within the blend to yield a series of antagonistic metaphors. Through the eyes of the teenage narrator, McGahern makes an outrageous ideological statement against Puritanism and Catholicism.*

**Keywords**— *McGahern, puritanism, blending, split-selves, mind-styles.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to offer insights into John McGahern's ideological point of view in his second novel *The Dark* (1965) by focusing on the way characters and their mind styles are construed from a cognitive stylistic perspective. This method of analysis provides us with efficient tools to decipher some of the implicit meanings and messages which encapsulated McGahern's critical view of the rural, religion-pervaded and puritan Irish society of his time.

The rationale behind the application of cognitive-stylistic techniques to the analysis of this literary piece of work is justified if we bear in mind several important facts. First, the two characters analyzed, Mahoney, the protagonist's widowed father, and Father Gerald, a priest, are not only by-products of their social and cultural context, but they are also very complex constructs, with multiple faces or selves. Second, some of the cultural references are definitely opaque and inaccessible for contemporary readers outside the mid-60s, rural Ireland. And finally, the opacity of reference makes the rich and sometimes colorful imagery (especially the description of religious ceremonies) keep a series of conceptual metaphors and metonymies out of immediate sight. In the following sections I attempt to foreground them, so that McGahern's view of the Ireland of his youth can be fully interpreted and understood.

## Theoretical Framework and Methodology

### 1.1. Mind style and mental spaces

According to Semino (2002), mind style deals with how the language employed can reflect the conceptual structures and schemas that characterize an individual's world view, that is, their overall view of reality and ultimately, their ideological point of view.

In order to carry out my analysis I have articulated the notion of mind style with the Mental Spaces Theory (Fauconnier 1985, 1994) and the Blending Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 2002).

Mental spaces are defined by Fauconnier (1985) as assembled packages of elements and relations constructed and modified as thought or discourse unfolds. These packages are typically connected to long-term schematic knowledge, such as a priest's performance during a mass service, and to long-term specific knowledge, such as a memory of the time you helped your dad pick potatoes in the field on a stormy day. The mental space includes you, your dad, the affective relationship between you two, the potato field and the hard work that typically goes with it, the stormy afternoon, and maybe the mud all over your hands and legs. These elements and relations are organized into a *frame* that could be named "hard work in the field", or "Irish peasants' hard work".

Mental spaces are structured by knowledge from different conceptual domains. The space of you helping your dad at a potato field, for example, draws on

labouring the field, the weather conditions, the father-son relationship, and maybe the difficult life in the countryside in rural Ireland domains, as is the case in *The Dark*.

Conceptual integration or Blending Theory is a general cognitive operation by which structure from input mental spaces is projected to a separate, *blended* space (Fauconnier and Turner, 1994, 2002). These input mental spaces have common elements and structures, which make them belong to a generic space, a general contextual background where frames coexist and interact. At any moment in discourse, the generic space maps onto each of the input spaces, defining cross-space mappings (or correspondences) between the source input space and the target input space. I have drawn on Conceptual Metaphor Theory to explain the selective mappings across spaces, from the source input space onto the target input space, since these mappings are of a metaphorical or metonymic nature in the novel. Generic and blended spaces are intrinsically connected, as blends contain generic structure, but also more specific structure, captured from the source and target input spaces.

In the present paper, the Blending theory is employed to account for instances of indirect reference and referential opacity, especially when trying to foreground the most critical statements made by John McGahern in his depiction of social and religious controversial issues. The resulting metaphors in the blended space are a reflection of the mind style of the two characters dealt with in this paper (Mahoney and the priest Father Gerald Malone) and of McGahern's ideological point of view in the case of the scenes described: the Corpus Christi procession and the protagonist's sexual arousal and masturbation after seeing a hair-removal advert in *The Irish Independent* newspaper.

### 1.2. Characterization. Split selves

The complexity with which John McGahern builds the characters appearing in *The Dark* will be explained by analysing the source input spaces in the blends as instances of split selves. Emmot (2002) defines split selves as the different instances of a character being divided in any way in a narrative. Lakoff (1996) reserves the term for occasions where different intellectual or social aspects of the self are activated. In the following sections, I will show how the characters' "farmer self", "religious self", or "child molester self" take over, depending on the contextual background, which helps activate them. I shall attempt to demonstrate how their different selves contribute to structure conceptual metaphors within the blended space, where the author makes his most outrageous claims in his critical account

of the puritan society of rural Ireland in the 1960s.

The act of narration in itself may provide the reader with multiple opportunities to identify different descriptions and versions of the characters alongside each other, that is, they are juxtaposed. The key point in *The Dark* lies in the different aspects of the character's selves as they adopt different personae in different situations (Emmott, 2002; Billington et al., 1998; Bosma and Kunnen, 2001).

"You did it. There's marks for you. That's what'll show them who has got the brains round here,' Mahoney shouted as he read." (...)

"What we'll have to get you first is clothes and shoes. You're someone now. We can't have you looking the part of the ragman.'" (...)

"We want a whole new outfit for this fellow, he's after getting first place in university. Scholarship and all Honours in his Leaving. (...) he is going to be someone in the world, not like us."

Thus, the character of Mahoney presents a multiple-faced self, or rather, a multitude of selves. Each of the selves is depicted by John McGahern as a prototypical figure of the Irish society of the time and they all refer metonymically to certain aspects of that puritan social organization, namely, rural community, predestination, sexual repression and a male organization of society.

The blended space is structured by combining these metonymies, which interact with each other. Furthermore, their epistemic correspondences or mappings, help structure a complex case of multiple metonymy-based metaphors, or *metaphonymies* (Goossens, 1990), all of which are contained within Mahoney's character's mind style. These metaphonymies are LIFE IS A ROAD BACK (predestination), LUST IS A PRISONER OF PURITANISM (repressed sexuality, further analysed in the following sections), and FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IS WAR (patriarchy). See figure 1.

#### 1.2.2. Father Gerald Malone

The presence of a priest as one of the main characters in *The Dark* is obviously not accidental. Priests were very powerful and influential figures in what some authors have called a theocratic political system in Ireland in the 1960s.

John McGahern uses the character of Father Gerald to illustrate the scope of social and cultural influence and the authority that the Catholic Church had and exercised. I shall term this SELF 1, by virtue of which a metonymic correspondence is established. Father

Gerald constitutes the source domain which stands for theocracy and cultural control.

The very first time Father Gerald appears in the novel, he is paying his cousin Mahoney a visit, but it is soon clear that he is after something else. Mahoney Jr. is a good student and the priest, being relatives, intends to get him into priesthood, making use of his influential connections. Mahoney Jr. likes the idea: being a priest is prestigious and you ensure yourself a living, so he accepts an invitation to spend a few weeks at Father Gerald's home in the summer, a lonely and quite isolated parish in the countryside, not far from Cavan. In chapter 4, page 25, Mahoney and Father Gerald discuss Mahoney Jr.'s academic possibilities:

“‘He may not have to slave on any farm. He's always been head of his class.’

‘I was head of my class once too and far it got me.’

‘Times have changed. There are openings and opportunities today that never were before.’”

(...)

“‘He'd not be like his father if he could. He'd be a priest if he got the chance, and there were dreams of wooden pulpits and silence of churches, walking between yew and laurel paths in prayer (...) He'd walk that way through life towards the untamable heaven of joy, not his father's path.

He'd go free in God's name.’”

The use of free indirect thought is employed by McGahern to make us aware of Mahoney Jr.'s intense inner thoughts. This construction, which includes the modal *would* and the third person singular, stresses the gap between the sad, depressing reality and the boy's undisclosed aspirations.

The priest's influence, which even a savage like Mahoney is scared of, is explicitly stated at the beginning of chapter 4, page 24:

“‘Father Gerald came every year, he was a cousin and his coming was a kind of watch. Mahoney hated it, but because of his fear of a priest's power he made sure to give the appearance of a welcome.’”

And again, in chapter 9, page 49, Father Gerald toys with the likely possibility of getting Mahoney Jr. a place at a prestigious seminary in Maynooth after leaving school:

“‘He smiled in reflection, ‘Doors open under the right pressures. We are cousins. And if we cannot help our own who can we help! But don't worry, all you can profitably do now is work hard at your studies. Perhaps next year you can come

and stay with me for part of the summer holidays, and we can talk properly then?’”

The priest exerts his persuasive abilities and his influence to attract young Mahoney towards priesthood, but he does it in a rather subtle, tentative way, using epistemic modality (*can* expressing possibility, *perhaps*), the use of if-construction and rising intonation with a declarative structure of the sentences.

These three linguistic markers disguise Father Gerald's real intentions, namely, to take Mahoney Jr. to his house with him for a few weeks. They make the priest's language sound casual, non-assertive, definitely a good way to hide his true purpose.

In chapter 11, page 65, we come to another disturbing scene when Mahoney Jr. is already at the priest's house, and where the priest's hidden self takes over. On arriving home, Father Gerald undresses in front of the boy, and perhaps for the first time he sees a priest in a different light, he realizes that priests are human beings, men just like himself, and therefore they must have the same weaknesses:

“‘It was shocking to see a priest without his collar for the first time. The neck was chafed red. The priest looked human and frail.’” (...)

“‘He yawned and in the same sleepy movement began to unbutton his trousers. He drew up the shirt and vest to show his naked stomach, crisscrossed by two long scars, the blue toothmarks of the stitches clear. He showed the pattern of the operation with a finger spelling it out on the shocking white flesh.’” (...)

This first, apparent self will be labeled SELF 2, by virtue of which Father Gerald is conceptualized as the source target which stands for human nature within a metonymic mapping. There is also a good example of multimodal metaphor: the criss-cross carved by the operation scars on the priest's belly. The cross is the symbol of Christianity, but it is carved in human flesh, little to do with divinity or the spiritual world. Religion is a very human issue. Priests are men of flesh and bone.

A while later, late at night, Mahoney Jr. is already in bed. Father Gerald comes to the bedroom unexpectedly pretending that he cannot sleep and that he would like to have a chat with the boy. Mahoney Jr. sees nothing wrong with that at first (chapter 12, page 70):

(...) “‘but soon suspicion grew in place of the terror, what could the priest want in the room at this hour, the things that have to happen. (...) when he moved into the moonlight to draw back a corner of the bedclothes.’”

(...) “‘you stiffened when his arm went about

your shoulder, was this to be another of the midnight horrors with your father.”

(...) “The roving fingers touched your throat. You couldn't do or say anything.”

McGahern employs free indirect thought again to express the boy's tormenting thoughts, Father Gerald is now referred to as *the priest* in the boy's mind, and he uses the noun *flesh* metonymically to refer to the priest's body as opposed to *spirit*, which would be more in accordance with a man of God. More importantly, when the priest gets into bed the narration shifts to the second person singular *you* even though Mahoney Jr. is actually referring to himself. Through the use of the *you* narrator, McGahern intends to detach Mahoney Jr. not only from a suspect molester like his cousin the priest, but also from religion in general, for which Father Gerald stands metonymically. I shall call this hidden self as SELF 2B, which stands for repressed sexuality.

Furthermore, the boy's disenchantment with the priest in particular, and with religion in general becomes apparent after his conversation in bed with Father Gerald. During that conversation, the priest gets all the information he wants about the boy's life, especially the masturbation episodes. However, when the boy tries to obtain the same information from the priest, he only gets silence (chapter 12, page 74):

“He had broken down your life to the dirt, he'd reduced you to that, and no flesh was superior to other flesh. (...) He must have committed sins the same as yours once too, if he was flesh.

What right had he to come and lie with you in bed, his body hot against yours, his arm about your shoulders. Almost as the cursed nights when your father used stroke your thighs. You remembered the blue scars on the stomach by your side.”

Therefore, the input spaces are structured metonymically as explained above, and they interact with each other to end up yielding a couple of instances of metaphonymy: RELIGION IS POWER, and again, LUST IS THE PRISONER OF PURITANISM. See figure 2.

## II. IDEOLOGY

McGahern's ideological viewpoint impregnates the whole novel. McGahern's aversion to the catholic puritan society in which he grew up comes to the surface in two key scenes in the novel: the protagonist's witnessing of a religious procession on Corpus Christi's Day, and his sexual fantasies arisen after seeing a hair removal advert on a loose page from a newspaper.

### 2.1. The Corpus Christi procession

The procession scene in chapter 10, page 58, can be accurately described in the light of the blending theory:

“The rhododendron branches were cut out of Oakport same as always to decorate the grass margins of the processional route, (...)”

“Under the gold canopy the priest moved with the Sacrament, girls in their communion dresses strewing rose petals in its path, and behind the choir the banners of the sodalities self-conscious in the wake of the hymns. At the bridges and crossroads the police stood to salute.

Before the post office the people knelt in the dry dust of the road for Benediction. The humeral veil was laid on the priest's shoulders, the tiny bell tinkled in the open day, the host was raised and all heads bowed, utter silence except for the bell and some donkey braying in the distance.”

In the first place, we are presented with a very straightforward generic space: the colorful description of the religious event represents the pervading, overwhelming presence and influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland. The Corpus Christi procession shows off its pomp and paraphernalia. However, some things just do not seem right when we look closely. Firstly, the floral decoration is made up of rhododendrons, a very colorful and vivid image, but a flower with a very poisonous pollen. Its honey can actually kill a person. It is surprising that, given the importance that religion gives to symbolism and implicit messages, a poisonous flower is chosen to flank the path of the procession. This is a case of metaphonymy, in which a metonymy expands to construct the metaphor RELIGION IS THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE, at a time when the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland was overwhelming. Furthermore, rhododendrons came originally from Asia, as did opium. Secondly, the police stands metonymically for political power. The fact that they are paying their respects to the religious event while submissively saluting stands for theocracy. In the Ireland of the time priests and especially bishops controlled the political power to a great extent. Here we have another instance of metonymic expansion of the source domain of a metaphor. Thirdly, the raising of the host by the priest is a critical moment in the course of a catholic mass. It is at that moment that he is about to utter the words *In the name of the Father.....* religious zeal at its peak, “heads bowed and utter silence” out of devotion and submission by the faithful. And right at that very dramatic moment, the only thing that can be heard is the braying of a donkey.

It is not surprising to hear donkeys braying in a



rural setting, but the moment chosen by the author is by no means coincidental. There is an obvious intention. The priest is about to speak the most important words of the mass service and just then, it is the donkey the one who “preaches” by braying at that very moment. The metaphor here is PREACHING IS BRAYING, subsumed under a more general one, PRIESTS ARE DONKEYS, with all the qualities typically associated to donkeys: stubbornness, obstinacy, narrow-mindedness. But there is more to this passage: if we take a close look at the verbs *pray* and *bray* we find some significant points in common. Firstly, both verbs imply to utter sounds through the mouth: *praying* is what the faithful do, and *braying* is what donkeys do. Secondly, the two words are practically identical, both graphically and phonologically: the only difference is a voiced consonant, /b/ in the place of a voiceless one, /p/, a simple vibration of the vocal cords.

My interpretation for this passage is THE WORD OF GOD IS THE BRAYING OF A DONKEY, whether preaching or praying. This is of course utterly disrespectful and it is probably the clearest example of McGahern’s ideological position. As a non-believer, John McGahern is making an outrageous statement here. See figure 3.

## 2.2. The advert in *The Irish Independent*

Let us now focus our attention on the following passage at the very beginning of chapter 5, on page 30. It has remarkable relevance in the novel. John McGahern depicts sexual repression very vividly, giving a detailed description of the masturbation process, and involving, at the same time, puritan and religious habits which interact to yield a complex construct which is in itself one of the keynote messages of *The Dark*:

“One day she would come to me, a dream of flesh in woman, in frothing flimsiness of lace, cold silk against my hands.

An ad. Torn from *The Independent* by my face on the pillow, black and white of a woman rising. Her black lips open in a yawn. The breasts push out the clinging nightdress she wears, its two thin white straps cross her naked shoulders. Her arms stretched above her head to bear the growths of hair in both armpits.

### REMOVE SUPERFLUOUS HAIR

The eyes devour the tattered piece of newspaper as hotness grows. Touch the black hair with the lips, salt of sweat same as my own, let them rove along the rises of the breast. (...) She stirs to life, I have her excited, she too is crazy, get hands under her. One day she must come to me. I try to

pump madly on the mattress, fighting to get up her nightdress, and get into her, before too late, swoon of death into the softness of her flesh.”

This is a case of referential opacity. The passage does not simply describe the deliberate self-arousing and posterior masturbation of a teenager fantasizing about naked women in fancy lingerie. There is far more to it. However, some cultural background becomes indispensable if we are to fully comprehend the extent of McGahern's criticism.

Newspapers were often used as a base to kneel upon to pray the rosary. It was fairly common in the Ireland of the time (Maher, 2011) to use newspapers for this purpose. Humble homes had a dirt floor and people used newspaper sheets to avoid getting dirty. The passage above mentions just an advert, torn from a newspaper, but in chapter 19, page 118, there is a similar scene which also ends up with young Mahoney masturbating, and this time it is a loose sheet of newspaper and it is on the floor:

“A newspaper down on the floor, pull up the draped eiderdown, press your face on the bed's edge. (...) Pump your nakedness into the bed's belly, hot flush rushing to the face (...) Crumple the newspaper and put it on the burn, the wet centre hissing.”

The fact that the newspaper is *The Irish Independent* is of considerable relevance for the present analysis. *The Independent* is a conservative newspaper, very much along the lines of officialdom, namely, puritanism and catholicism.

Bearing in mind this cultural model in general and this experiential correlation in particular (i.e., the presence of a newspaper nearby, and the use young Mahoney makes of it), we can conclude that there is another instance of metonymy. This time we are before multiple metonymies structured within the same source input space, standing for multiple target spaces. The epistemic correspondences of these metonymies are *i*) a newspaper stands for praying the rosary, *ii*) an ad from a newspaper stands for lust and *iii*) the *Irish Independent* stands for conservative, puritan values.

The fact that we have one same referent (the newspaper) which belongs to two different domains (religion and lust) simultaneously, because of the relations explained above, helps McGahern merge two antagonistic concepts: puritanism and lust. But there is still more to this structure: the advert which triggers sexual arousing in Mahoney Jr. was torn from a conservative, puritan newspaper. The ad was inside the newspaper, it could not be perceived when you first looked at it, you needed to open the newspaper and search for it, and then tear it off.

Personification can help us structure what Turner (1991) calls *blended XYZ metaphors*. Blended XYZ metaphoric analogies involve three explicit terms (X, Y, Z) and one implicit term which is formulated as an analogy. Let us have a close look at the analogies:

X	Z	Y
The advert is	out of sight	inside the newspaper
Lust is	banned from view	in puritan society
A prisoner is	deprived of freedom	in prison

The implicit term is the resulting metaphor **LUST IS A PRISONER OF PURITANISM**. The explanation is pretty straightforward: the relationship between puritanism and lust is analogous to the relationship between a captor and their hostage. The same applies to the paper and the advert inside it. The advert seems to be imprisoned in the newspaper, and by tearing it off, Mahoney Jr. sets it free, releases it from its “prison” in much the same way as he releases his sexual desires.

In this instance of blended analogy McGahern denounces sexual repression in an ultra-catholic social system, and personifies it as a person deprived of freedom. See figure 4.

### III. FIGURES AND TABLES

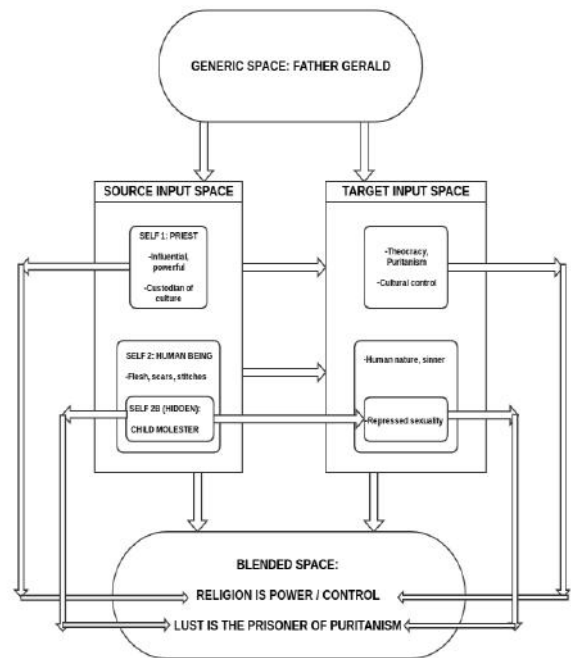


Fig.2: Father Gerald Malone

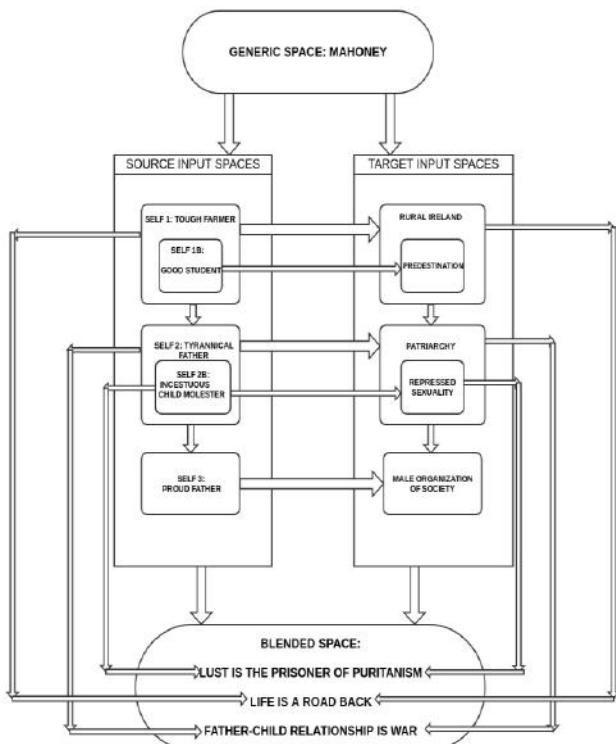


Fig.1: Mahoney

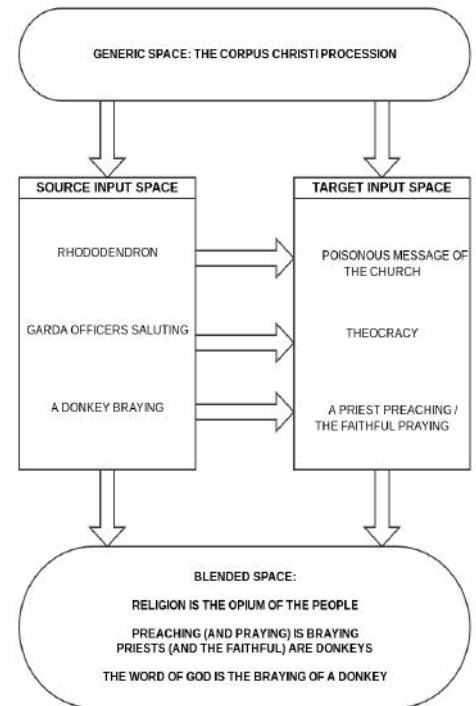


Fig.3: The Corpus Christi Procession

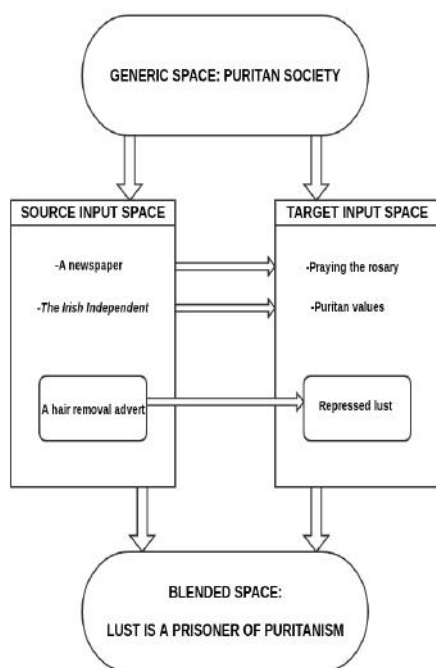


Fig.4: Puritan Society

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide a fine-grained analysis of the puritan society in Ireland in the mid-60s. For this purpose, we have drawn upon the cognitive stylistic notions of blending and split selves analysing the characters' mind styles and ultimately, the author's ideological standpoint, which is brought out through the protagonist's eyes.

John McGahern offers a vivid and colorful picture of an Irish rural setting, presenting us with several typical scenes and social events, such as the Corpus Christi procession, or the patriarchal organization of family life. Mahoney and Father Gerald are complex constructs with multiple, and sometimes contradictory, selves.

The application of blending and split selves to the characters and the scenes have revealed epistemic correspondences of both metonymic and metaphorical nature.

The resulting blended spaces have provided us with a series of metonymy-based metaphors, which can indeed be labeled metaphonymies, using Goossens' terminology. The most relevant of these resulting metaphonymies are RELIGION IS THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE, PREACHING IS BRAYING, and LUST IS THE PRISONER OF PURITANISM. These conceptual constructs structure the general mood of the novel and speak out for McGahern's antagonistic view of the Ireland of his time.

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