

2001-7

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### Recommended Citation

Maher, E., "A Glimpse of Irish Catholicism in John McGahern's "Amongst Women", *Doctrine and Life*, Vol. 51, No. 6., pp346-355, July/August, 2001

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# A Glimpse of Irish Catholicism in McGahern's *Amongst Women*

EAMON MAHER

I AM ONE of the thousands of people who are hooked on the writings of John McGahern. Long before the television adaptation of *Amongst Women* came to public attention, with the late Tony Doyle excellent in the role of Moran, I had been reading and writing about McGahern.

Last December I had the immense privilege of interviewing him on the theme of Catholicism and national identity in his works.<sup>1</sup> Talking to him before, during and after the interview I was struck by the unspoilt character of a writer who has become something of a literary icon in the past decade or so. He is a warm and sensitive human being, someone who is devoid of the pretentiousness of some writers who possess nothing like his talent or success. He listens to other people's observations as if he is hearing them for the first time (which is, I'm sure, rarely the case), as if he's genuinely interested in what his readers have to say. Ultimately, it is the readers who matter, in his evaluation. Once a work is published, it doesn't belong to the writer any more, but to the readers. He told me that Joyce once described the piano as the coffin of music and that, in the same way, he saw the book as a coffin of words. The book doesn't live again until it finds a reader and you get as many versions of the book as the number of readers it finds.

As a reader, I am immensely impressed with the authenticity of the universe McGahern portrays. There is something quintessentially Irish about his writings. People kneeling on newspapers to say the daily Rosary

1. The text of this interview was published in the Spring 2001 issue of *Studies – An Irish Quarterly*, pp. 70-83.

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or toiling in the fields, the ticking of a clock in the front parlour, the passing of the seasons, McGahern captures all these rituals that are so much part of our cultural specificity. This Ireland is in danger of disappearing in the current period of rapid economic growth. The danger is great that we might become another satellite state of the US. As long as people keep reading McGahern's novels, however, there will always be a chronicle of what life was like in rural Ireland during the 1940s and 1950s.

I want to deal with the writer's view of Catholicism. I will begin by discussing some of his comments with regard to the Catholic Church before going on to discuss how religion is portrayed in *Amongst Women*.

McGahern was born in Dublin on 12 November, 1934, but soon after his birth the family moved to Ballinamore, in County Leitrim. His father was a member of the Garda Síochána and his mother was a national school teacher. Because his job entailed moving around the country at various times, the father was often living in a barracks away from his wife and family. His mother was a very religious woman and imparted her convictions to her children. She died of cancer at a young age, an event that is movingly recounted in *The Leavetaking*, the most autobiographical of all McGahern's works of fiction:

She was gone where I could not follow and I would never lay eyes again on the face I loved. If I could only have that wasted hour by the lorry back to drink in that face, if I had it now, one moment of it, to go up those stairs, and look on her one last time.<sup>2</sup>

There was never the same warmth between father and son as there had been between the writer and his mother. Life moved on, however, and John completed his secondary school studies before training as a national school teacher in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. He felt the desire to write early on in his teaching career and his first novel, *The Barracks*, was published in 1963. With the publication of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965, John's career as a teacher in Ireland came to an end. The novel was banned by the Censorship Board, a fate that befell many novels, good and bad, during these conservative times. In addition to his novel being banned, however, John had also taken the unforgivable decision to marry in a registry office in England. The combination of

2. *The Leavetaking*, 1984, London, Faber & Faber, second edition; p. 76.

the two events led to his dismissal from Scoil Eoin Bhaiste, in Clontarf. The affair caused quite a furore at the time and McGahern was told by his publisher that this would help his book to sell. All the writer felt was shame that Ireland could be making such a fool of itself after the long, hard struggle to gain independence. The intervention of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, who told the school manager, Fr Carton, to fire McGahern, did not cause him to grow bitter towards organised religion. In fact, he still has nothing but gratitude to the Church for introducing him to ritual, ceremony and a sense of the sacred. The main difficulty he had with the Church was in the realm of sexuality:

I would think that if there was one thing injurious about the Church, it would be its attitude to sexuality. I see sexuality as just part of life. Either all of life is sacred or none of it is sacred. I'm inclined to think that all of life is sacred and that sexuality is a very important part of that sacredness. And I think that it [the Church] made a difficult enough relationship – which is between people, between men and women – even more difficult by imparting an unhealthy attitude to sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, sexuality was the big taboo for the Catholic Church in Ireland around this time. The papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, caused much pain and anguish to sincere Catholics here who wanted to have control over the planning of their families. It is a dispute that can still reverberate today as the Church's stance on the use of contraceptives has not evolved and people can still remember the turmoil it caused them a few decades ago. *The Dark* spoke openly of masturbation and even hinted at clerical child abuse (the young hero's uncle, Fr Gerald, visits the child's room at night to discuss his vocation with him). It is not surprising therefore that it incurred the censor's wrath.

There is, at times, a stark realism about McGahern's prose that has the power to shock the reader, even today. He can be daring when it comes to his descriptions of sex, for example. Some passages in *The Pornographer* are extremely explicit and make one question what is the purpose of such graphic depictions of cold, imper-sonal sex. When viewed in the context of the author's opinion about sex being sacred, in the

3. *Studies*, pp. 73-4.

same way as life is sacred, we can see that McGahern's aim was to show that sex should not be reduced to the mechanistic, that it needs the bond of love and human warmth to make it worthwhile. What interests him primarily is the human adventure and that adventure is a spiritual adventure. His writings are a type of quest, a spiritual odyssey, which can lead him down paths he never intended to explore.

Now that I have provided some background I think it is appropriate that we should have a more indepth look at *Amongst Women*, which won *The Irish Times* Aer Lingus Literary award and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Today, eleven years after its initial publication, it still sells over ten thousand copies annually. This does not surprise me as it has all the hallmarks of a classic.<sup>4</sup> It provides a telling insight into life in rural Ireland during the 1940s and 50s.

The main character, Moran, is a veteran of the War of Independence and a widower with responsibility for bringing up a large young family. A man with very definite ideas about religion, the family, farming, he cannot bear to be contradicted in any way. This desire to dominate is clearly brought into focus the evening that his former comrade-in-arms, McQuaid, visits the house for the last time. McQuaid has become a wealthy cattle-dealer and he and Moran always spent Monaghan day at the Great Meadow, as Moran's farm was called. They reminisced about their escapades during the struggle for independence while McQuaid drank whiskey and ate the sumptuous meal prepared by the Moran girls. On this particular evening McQuaid becomes irritated by Moran's insistence on having things on his terms or not at all and decides for the first time not to spend the night at Great Meadow. As he is getting into his Mercedes to drive away, he says aloud: 'Some people just cannot bear to come in second.'<sup>5</sup> He is right, of course. Although Moran had been his superior during the War, it is McQuaid who has prospered in the new Free State that has emerged as the fruit of their struggle. He realised the significance of this dispute:

After years he had lost his oldest and best friend but in a way he had

4. I'm sure that Professor Declan Kiberd would agree that all that is needed is for more time to elapse before *Amongst Women* gains that title. Professor Kiberd's *Irish Classics* (2000, London: Granta Books) provides compelling reading for anyone interested in this topic.

5. *Amongst Women*, p. 22.

always despised friendship; families were what mattered, more particularly that larger version of himself – *his* family; and while seated in the same scheming fury he saw each individual member gradually slipping out of his reach. Yes, they would eventually all go. He would be alone.<sup>6</sup>

It was probably at this time that Moran decided to remarry. He chose a fine partner in Rose, a woman who loved him and his children and who brought a gentler feminine side to life at Great Meadow. Because for all that he espoused a strict religious observance, with the daily Rosary and Mass on Sundays vital elements in that, Moran was lacking in the most basic of Christian virtues, charity. He sees nothing wrong in depriving his daughter, Sheila, of a university education, because of his fears of what it might cost him and his misplaced belief that, as all his children were equal in his eyes, it wouldn't do to have one outstripping the others. He doesn't see the paradox either in his avowed love of his children and the reign of terror he wages against them at times. Rose is surprised at the fearful way the children move around the house:

Only when they dropped or rattled something, the startled way they would look towards Moran, did the nervous tension of what it took to glide about so silently show.... The violence Moran had turned on her she chose to ignore, to let her own resentment drop and to join the girls as they stole about so that their presences would never challenge his.<sup>7</sup>

Moran is a product of his time and upbringing. He is unable to give verbal or physical expression to his emotions. His wife and children have to constantly make allowances for 'Daddy' because he is never going to change, is incapable of it. He is fond of repeating phrases like 'The family that prays together, stays together', and seems genuinely to believe in their veracity. His allegiance is to values for which he has fought and in which he believes strongly. The Catholic religion is not questioned by him or his family. His is a kind of blind faith that doesn't involve soul-searching or indepth analysis. In that, he is typical of the majority of Irish people during the 1950s and 60s, especially in rural Ireland. Life was harsh and uncompromising and religion one of the few comforts

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

available. He gives this advice to his daughter Maggie before she leaves for London: 'You never know how low or high you'll go. No matter how you rise in the world never look down on another. That way you can never go far wrong.'<sup>8</sup> She listens intently to his every word because he is her father and, as such, must be right in his assessment.

Problems arise when his son Luke doesn't buy into his vision of life and chooses to follow his own path. We hear indirectly of the beatings that Moran meted out to his eldest son, a violence that he sees as a natural extension of his paternal duty. But Luke never returns after leaving Great Meadow where his father's authority is total. It rankles with Moran that one of his children has escaped from his control and that he cannot reach him on any level. He cannot see that his son, in leaving, was merely following a heartfelt need to live his own life. Before his death, Moran tries to effect a reconciliation and even goes so far as to offer an apology:

Let me say that I had no wish to harm you in the past and I have no wish to harm you in the future and if I have done so in thought, word or deed I am sorry. The daffodils are nearly in bloom, also shrubs, flowers, fruit etc. It'll soon be time for planting. Tired now and of that thought, who cares anyhow? Daddy.<sup>9</sup>

On reading the letter, Luke rightly concludes that his father is growing old. He replies that he, like Moran, doesn't hold any grudges. At the same time, he doesn't travel home to visit the dying man. Too much has happened between them for any sort of normal relationship to resume. When faced with death, many questions with regard to religion and faith arise. In McGahern's first novel, the heroine, Elisabeth Reegan, who is suffering from terminal cancer looks out one morning on the countryside whose beauty had escaped her when she was healthy:

It was so beautiful when she let the blinds up first thing that, 'Jesus Christ' softly was all she was able to articulate as she looked out and up the river to the woods across the lake, black with the leaves fallen except the red rust of the beech trees, the withered reeds standing pale and sharp as bamboo rods at the edges of the water.<sup>10</sup>

8. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

10. *The Barracks*, 1963, London: Faber & Faber, p. 170.

This is the reaction of a dying person who looks on the physical world with greater intensity when they know they are soon to leave it all behind, to swap it for the uncertainty of eternity. We have access to Elisabeth Reegan's thoughts in a way that is not true of Moran. The latter is seen through the eyes of his family. He is the adored father, the feared tyrant, the counsellor, the ruler. It comes as a shock to his family to see him wandering aimlessly towards the meadow where he is often found looking vacantly at a scene that is consolingly familiar to him. Whereas Elisabeth Reegan achieves something of an epiphany before she dies, we cannot say the same for Moran. Elisabeth is not as outwardly religious as Moran, but she possesses a spirituality that gives her strength in the face of death. She has the courage to refuse the parish priest when he asks her to become a member of the Legion of Mary, a brave step for the wife of a local Garda. If required, Moran would not flinch from taking a similar line. One thing he is not lacking is moral courage. On his death-bed the family say the Rosary, which seems like an appropriate prayer as its recital has marked their lives in a special way.<sup>11</sup> They cease praying when they believe that he has slipped away, only to be asked why they have stopped. His last words are 'Shut up!', addressed to Maggie. It appears as though he wished to say something but expired before its enunciation.

The life of the Civil War veteran is recognised by the draping of a 'faded' tricolour on his coffin, an irony that doesn't escape the reader's attention. The Ireland that he has fought for is a disappointment to him and he sees that it has resulted merely in 'some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half of my own family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod.'<sup>12</sup> Disillusioned, Moran dies feeling that his life has not amounted to much. We don't know what help, if any, his Catholic faith was to him. His wife and daughters genuinely mourn his death:

11. Eamon Wall makes the point that the repetition of the Rosary is an intrinsic Catholic ritual and part of the timeless rhythm of rural life. He goes on to remark: 'It is true that although his children never espouse negative attitudes to Catholicism, they nevertheless do not share their father's enthusiasm for it. Family prayer remains a binding force at Great Meadow though its function has shifted.' ('The Living Stream: John McGahern's *Amongst Women* and Irish Writing in the 1990s', in *Studies – An Irish Quarterly*, Volume 88, Number 351, p. 310.)

12. *Amongst Women*, p. 5.



It was as if their first love and allegiance had been pledged uncompromisingly to this one house and man and that they knew that he had always been at the very centre of all parts of their lives.<sup>13</sup>

There is just one more aspect of the book I'd like to dwell on and that is sexuality. I have already referred to McGahern's view of how harmful the Church's attitude to sexuality was. In *Amongst Women* there are signs that attitudes to sex are changing. Micheal, at the tender age of fifteen, has a passionate affair with the returned emigrant, Nell Moraghan, who drives him around the country in her car. She also initiates him into the art of love-making. He is grateful to find gentleness and comfort in the arms of a woman who is experienced in the ways of the world. When his father finds out about his missing school and his carry-on with this woman of loose morals the inevitable showdown takes place. Michael, usually protected from his father's violence by his sisters, finds himself with only Rose as an ally, now that the girls have left home. He decides to go to England. Nell drives him to Dublin and they stay in a hotel the night before they join Mona and Sheila, who are both working in the civil service. Nell is wise enough to see that the affair has run its course and that she and Michael have no future together once she heads back to America. Their last hours together are taken up with bouts of passionate sex:

She received him as if he were both man and child, his slenderness cancelled by strength, his unsureness by pride; and she took him each time as if she were saying a slow and careful farewell to a youth she herself had to work too hard ever to have had when she was young. Not until morning did they fall into a sleep of pure exhaustion.<sup>14</sup>

This seems at a very far remove indeed from the repressed sexuality of Moran's generation. There doesn't seem to be any guilt or preoccupation with sin. It's as if Michael has escaped all the conditioning with regard to sex that he must have received in school. Contrast this with the wedding night of Rose and Moran when the couple retire to bed:

They [the children] tried not to breathe as they listened. They were

13. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

too nervous and frightened of life to react to or put into words the sounds they heard from the room where their father was sleeping with Rose.<sup>15</sup>

Sex is dealt with in a very sensitive way in *Amongst Women*. We can see that there is a major difference again in how it is viewed by Moran and by his children. Sheila, who has a slightly rebellious streak, dares to leave the meadow where they are saving hay to return to the cottage to make love with her husband, Seán. The family are disgusted by the blatant show of affection they witness between the two who play in the hay and kiss before heading back to the house. The reaction of those left behind is one of resentment. They feel betrayed, defiled in some way:

No one spoke in the intense uneasiness, but they were forced to follow them in their minds into the house, how they must be shedding clothes, going naked towards one another ..., as the forks sent a rustle through the drying hay. They hated that they had to follow it this way. It was more disturbingly present than if it were taking place in the meadow before their very eyes. It was even there when they tried to shut it out. 'You'd think they could have waited,' Michael said quietly, in agreement with the resentment he felt all about him. It was as if the couple were together disregarding the inviolability of the house, its true virginity, with a selfish absorption.<sup>16</sup>

Sex is not something with which even the children are entirely comfortable. Michael, himself experienced in the sexual domain, feels that Seán and Sheila could have waited for the dark of night to satisfy their longing. The fact that they do it in the house in which they all grew up and that they associate with their father is another contributory factor to their unease and annoyance. The inviolability and 'virginity' of the house have been tainted by this act. So, while the Morans have been touched by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, they still hold that certain values are sacrosanct and they do not wish to dispense completely with their father's principles. When at Great Meadow a certain decorum was *de rigueur*.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-6.

Some critics have commented that *Amongst Women* provides a microcosm of rural Ireland from the War of Independence to the 1970s. The Moran clan, although sheltered to a certain extent from the outside world while at home on their farm, have to uproot themselves to earn a living in Dublin and London. We have seen that while religion is less important for them than for their father, they never fail to see the important role it plays in their lives. Moran passes on his belief system to his family who will need help, he knows, in facing the temptations of city life.

*Amongst Women* is a fine novel and one I would recommend unreservedly to anyone who wishes to get an insight into life in Ireland around the middle of the twentieth century. The popularity of the television adaptation will have served to deepen understanding among those living outside Ireland of what makes us tick as a nation.

I will conclude with a quote from McGahern's first novel which sums up the attitude of many of his characters to religion:

It seemed as a person grew older that the unknowable reality, God, was the one thing you could believe or disbelieve in with safety, it met you with imponderable silence and could never be reduced to the nothingness of certain knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

There's enough in those lines to keep one musing for quite some time.

17. *The Barracks*, p. 177.

## *In Religious Life Review*

July / August 2001

'A City Set on a Hill-top Cannot Hidden'

Contemplative Life

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, O.P.