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THE FIGURE OF THE FATHER IN JOHN McGAHERN'S „*THE BARRACKS*“, „*THE DARK*“ AND „*AMONGST WOMEN*“

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. WHY JOHN McGAHERN?

The title of this M.A.-Thesis is “The Figure of the Father in John McGahern’s *“The Barracks”*, *“The Dark”* and *“Amongst Women”*”.

I encountered John McGahern’s work while I was studying at the University College Dublin as an Erasmus student from September 2004 until May 2005. At this university I attended a hugely interesting lecture on Anglo-Irish literature for which, among other brilliant novels and theater plays, I had to read *“Amongst Women”*, John McGahern’s last novel. While I was studying for the written exam, it soon became clear to me that the topic of my M.A.-Thesis would concern Irish literature.

As I came back home to Vienna I attended a literary seminar at the English Department of the University of Vienna, again on Irish literature. This literary seminar focused on Irishness in selected short stories by various Irish writers. Consequently, I became more involved into what it could mean to be Irish. During my research for my seminar paper I also read about John McGahern’s work, which is strongly autobiographical and therefore primarily focused on his father, Sergeant Francis McGahern. One passage in a scientific book about Irish literature and also about the figure of the father in John McGahern’s works was the final inspiration for my choice of the topic of this M.A.-Thesis.

I have chosen these three novels to discuss them in my M.A.-Thesis for various reasons. First of all, it appeared to be reasonable to analyze *“Amongst Women”* as it was the first of McGahern’s novels I had the pleasure to read. This book was so appealing that not discussing it would simply be a great shortcoming. Moreover, it was the novelist’s last and at the same time most praised novel. *“The Barracks”* was McGahern’s first publication and at the same time the only one of his works which focused on a female main character, Elizabeth Reegan. It appeared to be

challenging to find and analyze other father figures, apart from the biological father, like priests, doctors or a former lover. “*The Dark*” is interesting as it was banned in the Republic of Ireland right after its publication. Moreover, it cost the great Irish novelist his teaching post and forced him to leave the country for some time, although his emotional attachment to his home country Ireland remained unaffected throughout.¹ Furthermore, these three novels appear to be interesting as they show three father figures at different stages of their lives: in his first novel John McGahern presents a father in his mid-forties who has three children still attending ground school. As will be discussed later, there is no hint that Sergeant Reegan applies any physical violence to his children, possibly because they are still very young and therefore manipulable enough to be scared into obeying their father without corporal punishment. “*The Dark*” confronts the readership with a father of teenagers: he appears to have to punish his children harder to make them respect and – or better to say – to obey him. “*Amongst Women*” depicts a father figure at the closing stage of his life: his children range from teenagers to adults who indeed strongly respect and even fear their father. However, when the story of “*Amongst Women*” starts, his three daughters and two sons would not tolerate physical violence any longer. Furthermore, Moran, the father in “*Amongst Women*”, seems to be aware of the fact that he is getting weaker in his physical strength while his children, especially his daughters, are growing stronger and more independent. His two sons appear to have led more independent lives than his sisters anyway, so holding them back from growing up is probably useless. Also Rüdiger Imhof argues that

Moran obviously derives from Reegan of *The Barracks*, Mahoney of *The Dark* and a number of other father-figures in McGahern’s stories. He shares with Reegan his bitter disenchantment with the Irish Free State for which he fought only to find that the heady days of national struggle resulted merely in ‘some of our johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen’.²

Surprisingly, “*Amongst Women*” was the most resourceful of these novels, despite the fact it basically offers only one father-figure for analysis: Moran, the central character himself.

¹ Cahalan, James M. “Female and Male Perspectives on Growing Up Irish”. *Double Visions: Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999. 120.

² Imhof, Rüdiger. “John McGahern”. *The Modern Irish Novel. Irish Novelists After 1945*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2002. 235.

As already hinted at, the three novels discussed appear to be closely knit, as if one was the sequel of the previous. Also Antoinette Quinn argues that “John McGahern is an obsessional writer, compulsively returning in novel after novel to the same small clan of characters (...).”³ With this, Quinn suggests that various themes recur again and again in McGahern’s books, as for instance the childless stepmothers, Elizabeth in “*The Barracks*” and Rose in “*Amongst Women*”, as well as relationships between adults and their (step)children. Quinn focuses on “*The Barracks*” and “*Amongst Women*” to proof her theory: in both novels we encounter an Irish Catholic household in the countryside with a childless, sensitive and emotionally mature stepmother, fathers who are disillusioned fighters of the Irish War of Independence, as well as “children at the mercy of adult moods.”⁴ Additionally, Antoinette Quinn observes that both novels focus on patterns, routines and rituals as well as difficulties with the two families, which are apparently very similar, as well as on the death of parent, followed by the mentioned stepmothers. However, it would be misleading to assume that these two novels do not show any differences: the first – and very obvious – difference is that “*The Barracks*” focuses on a woman, while “*Amongst Women*” has a male central character. In McGahern’s first novel, Elizabeth’s consciousness and her spiritual development are the center of attention, while the (rural Irish Catholic) family appears to be only a frame to tell the woman’s story. In contrast to this “Moran is a centre of attention rather than a central consciousness.”⁵ Moreover, Moran’s bonds with his children and his second wife Rose are the most important aspects of a novel that seems to lack a plot. Elizabeth’s relationship to her three stepchildren, who remain vaguely described throughout the novel, is rather a means of supporting her emotional development than a central theme in the novel.

Additionally, especially these three novels, together with John McGahern’s autobiography “*Memoir*”, appear to be a persuasive source for the analysis of the figure of the father in the work of this author. At various occasions it appears to be reasonable and useful to include “*Memoir*” to reveal autobiographical elements and parallels between John McGahern’s father and the father figures in

³ Quinn, Antoinette. “A Prayer For My Daughters: Patriarchy in *Amongst Women*.” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (1991/17:1): 79.

⁴ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 80.

⁵ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 80.

the novels analyzed in this M.A.-thesis. Moreover, McGahern's last publication – in connection with the three chosen novels – might even help to discover traits of Irish culture and family life in the time of one of the greatest Irish novelists of the twentieth century.

1.2. THE AIM OF THIS M.A.-THESIS

As the title suggests, I would like to discuss the figure of the father in three of John McGahern's novels: "*The Barracks*", his first novel, "*The Dark*" his second novel, which was banned immediately after its publication and for which he was dismissed from his teaching post⁶, and "*Amongst Women*", his last and at the same time most highly praised novel, which won him many literary prizes and quickly turned into a major commercial success in his native country as well as in Great Britain and France.⁷

While "*The Barracks*" is the only one of his novels in which a woman, Elizabeth Reegan, is the main character, it is evident that this work offers various opportunities to discuss the figure of the father. "*The Dark*" and "*Amongst Women*" place one male character each into the center of attention. Moreover, the narrative technique in each book must also be discussed, albeit only, because it opens up a deeper insight into the characters, especially into the father figures. Furthermore, the main themes which these three novels have in common should be pointed out in order to allow a better comparison and analysis of John McGahern's works: "the themes of death, suffering, pain, love and sexuality, in particular the destructive power of sexuality [as it was oppressed]."⁸ Also, the father-son conflict appears to be emphasized⁹, especially in "*The Dark*" and "*Amongst Women*", which should find its space here in connection with the analysis of the figure of the father. Additionally, I would like to include John McGahern's "*Memoir*", which was published shortly before he passed away in

⁶ Maher, Eamon, "John McGahern, A Writer In Tune With His Time". *Crosscurrents and Confluences: Echoes of Religion In Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Ed. Eamon Maher. Dublin: Veritas, 2000. 139-154.

⁷ Sampson, Denis. *Outstaring Nature's Eye. The Fiction of John McGahern*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993. 215.

⁸ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 213-237.

⁹ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 214.

2006.¹⁰ This appears to be appropriate, as “[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.”¹¹ This means that not only his autobiography, but also his works do not only reflect the characters’ lives, time and milieu they exist in, but also the author’s.¹² In his autobiography, which was his last publication, the famous Irish author John McGahern outlines his life, which was strongly influenced by his father Francis and also by his beloved mother Susan¹³ who died of breast cancer when John was still a boy.. In a work as autobiographical as John McGahern’s “(...) knowledge of [the] background clarifies”¹⁴ so in connection with other aspects like violence and religion¹⁵ in Irish society, this autobiography helps to develop a better understanding of what it could mean to be Irish as well as of John McGahern’s work itself: the father in his works is the key figure, connecting the novels as if one was the sequel of the preceding one. To a certain extent, also historical matters¹⁶ are treated in the novels discussed in this M.A.-thesis: the Irish War of Independence which has a lasting influence on the fathers in “*The Barracks*”, “*The Dark*”, and “*Amongst Women*”. In order to emphasize the importance of the figure of the father in these three novels, I will start the discussion of each work with an introduction to the content. To convey the atmosphere in the works by John McGahern discussed in this M.A.-thesis, the analysis of the narrative technique will be referred to, if relevant to the study of the father figure. Also other sources will be considered in order to enable a basis for a better understanding of the three masterpieces. This should also provide parallels and similarities between John McGahern and his father and his protagonists and their fathers as well as other potential father figures, like priests. Additionally, also family members like children or a second wife should be included; not only to prove theories and analyses of the father figures but also to

¹⁰Carey, John. “Memoir: Memoir by John McGahern”. Times Online, September 11, 2005. <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2102-1769117,00.html>>

¹¹ Guerlin, Wilfred L.; Labor, Earle; Morgan, Lee; Reesman, Jeanne C., Willingham, John R. “Historical and Biographical Approaches.” *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 51-77

¹² In this context, Hippolyte A. Taine explains that “race, milieu et moment” [of the author] have a great influence on a piece of literature. As a consequence of this, Taine regards “[any] literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author’s life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work.” For further information see Guerin, 51.

¹³ For further information on parents’ influence on their children see Guerin, 69-73.

¹⁴ Guerin, *Historical*, 51.

¹⁵ Cf., Guerin, *Historical*, 66.

¹⁶ Cf., Guerin, *Historical*, 52.

show the lasting impact patriarchy can have on a family, in this context especially on an Irish family.

1.3. THE FIGURE OF THE FATHER AND THE FATHER-SON-CONFLICT IN WORLD LITERATURE

The focus of this M.A.-thesis lies on the figure of the father in three selected novels by John McGahern. In particular the motif of the father-son conflict has a prominent position in this analysis. Consequently, it is appropriate to provide the reader of this thesis with a short overview or rather some representative examples of the figure of the father and the father-son conflict from world literature, as these motifs do not appear prominently in Irish literature nor in John McGahern's works only. Moreover, this might provide a better understanding of the figure of the father in the Irish writer's novels. Moreover, it will provide an Irish context, in which other factors like religion will support the explanation of the specific father figures analyzed.

Secondary and other scholarly literature has extensively emphasized that the motif of the father-son conflict is an ancient motif in world literature of any culture, country and time, which is expressed in a very wide range of conflicts and combats throughout the centuries.¹⁷ According to Horst S. and Ingrid Daemmrich the most frequently applied varieties of these motifs are the following ones:

“(1) son strangles father (...); (2) son commits incest with mother and when discovered, murders father (...); (3) brutal father kills son (...); (4) son blinds father, who regains his sight after the appearance of Christ; son atones by submitting to crucifixion (...); (5) unbridgeable antagonism between old and new world order (...); (6) generational conflict (...); (7) conflict reflecting the influence of class or milieu (...); (8) conflict based on deep-seated anxieties; obsessions, or uncontrollable drives (...); and (9) violent clash and reunion (...).”¹⁸

¹⁷ Frenzel, Elisabeth. “Vater-Sohn-Konflikt”. *Motive der Weltliteratur. Ein Lexikon Dichtungsgeschichtlicher Längsschnitte*. Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1988. 727.

¹⁸ Daemmrich Horst S. and Ingrid, “Father-Son”. *Themes & Motifs in Western Literature. A Handbook*. Tübingen: Francke, 1995. 108.

Elisabeth Frenzel assigns the father-son conflict to the fact that it tends to arise when the young generation matures and strives for independence while the old generations is still in the possession of power.¹⁹

The father figure and the father-son conflict have their beginnings already in antiquity: Jean-Charles Seigneuret treats this motif in his “*Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs*” in several chapters, one of which is the entry on the “*Great Father*”. Here Seigneuret explains that the “great father” can be traced back to classical Greek literature in which the Greek gods and their stories and ways are exhaustively treated. Especially Zeus, the father of the gods, has a prominent position in the Greek sagas: Seigneuret explains that in this context, “great” means that “he bows to no higher power and himself holds the classical world together.”²⁰ In his privileged position he is able to overthrow Kronos, his father, who once ate his own newborn offspring. His son Zeus, however, could escape his father and was even able to make him regurgitate his siblings and let them live again. Zeus’s siblings’ survival was guaranteed, therefore, and also “established a sanction for the family (...). In this way his “law” established the principle of dominance, (...), based on priority in time – parent over child, king over subject, and so on.”²¹ Also Elisabeth Frenzel argues that in ancient literature father and son often fight, usually for leadership and succession to the throne. Very often it is the young, inexperienced son who provokes the fight, while his father, full of wisdom and experience, suffers from this heavy conflict. However, we also encounter brutal fathers like Kronos who defend their powerful position and are even willing to harm or kill their own children.²² Moreover, Frenzel analyzes another variety of the father-son conflict: in literature there are also fathers who do not deny their sons their heritage, but raise them to come into it without considering whether the son is prepared or appropriate for this. Additionally, we also find gruesome sons who overview their fathers and even expel them from their countries.²³

¹⁹ , Cf., Frenzel, *Vater-Sohn-Konflikt*, 728.

²⁰ Seigneuret, Jean-Charles, “Great Father”. *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs*. A-J. Ed. A. Owen Aldridge, Armin Arnold, and Peter H. Lee. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. 547.

²¹ Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 547.

²² Cf., Frenzel, *Vater-Sohn-Konflikt*, 729.

²³ Cf., Frenzel, *Vater-Sohn-Konflikt*, 729-730.

In connection with the father-son conflict, Elisabeth Frenzel also explains how rivalry between father and son can result in a heavy fight, creating a deep rift between parent and child. As an example, Frenzel names Clemence Danes's "*Broome-Stage*", in which a family of actors experiences deep trouble because of the son's initial admiration for his father's talent which turns into the desire to become like him and to achieve his own goals in the acting profession. Another source of conflict can be the son's Oedipal/affectionate attachment to his own mother or the fight for a woman both the father and the son are in love with.²⁴

During the Age of Renaissance we can observe some change in the position of the father figure in literature: the "greatness" of the father, as we encounter it in Classical literature, declines and the father ends up as the representative of the law, indicating authority. In some plays by William Shakespeare, for instance "*Hamlet*" and "*Macbeth*", we may find father figures who "pointedly fail to guard communal life, and the representatives of paternal authority are vastly diminished in stature compared to their Greek predecessors."²⁵ During the social and political chaos of the Interregnum and the time of the Restoration, we find a rather stern form of paternity, fathers against who children stage horrible fights "in bloody debacles of incest, murder, and self-immolation."²⁶ An example for such a stern father can be found in the figure of God in "*Paradise Lost*" by John Milton, written in 1667. Here, the father is not completely satisfied with his creation. Consequently, also humankind feels alienated from their God and his restrictive values that are related to paternity. There is a real need of morality and reason to keep at least some kind of "civilized life in the world as a fallen sphere."²⁷

In the 18th century we are confronted with an even more dominant father figure: Daniel Defoe's "*Robinson Crusoe*" even flees from his father in England's capital and goes to the sea, to develop his own identity and commercial success. In the end, however, he does turn to God, the Father, for forgiveness, confronting himself with a father for the very first time in his whole life. In doing so he also

²⁴ Cf., Frenzel, *Vater-Sohn-Konflikt*, 732-735.

²⁵ Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 548.

²⁶ Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 549.

²⁷ Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 549.

acknowledges God as the ultimate representative of the law. In this context, also the Roman Catholic Religion and Church have to be considered, as they have provided God as an all-powerful father to every human being.²⁸ Like Robinson Crusoe, Henry Fielding's "*Tom Jones*" turns his back on his father, Squire Allworthy, and later makes a fresh start in a new relationship with his father, this time one that has more stability. However, Tom Jones's personality and temperament change when he learns the secret of his birth and wins Sophia Western's heart. Because of this personality change, his father punishes and almost hangs his own son. Another example for a harsh paternal authority is "*Clarissa Harlowe*" in which the heroine refuses to obey her father's order to marry an older man, another father figure. As a consequence, she is raped and tortured. Each father figure is a representative of "communal values and unbending authority"²⁹, despite their disrespectful behavior towards their children. Ideological problems are often depicted in literature, for instance, the father who has a rather conservative attitude and would like to maintain things while the son is rebellious and a symbol of new times.³⁰

The 19th century presents again a different picture of the figure of the father in literature: during the Victorian era, the father was either depicted as "starkly malevolent or excessively weak and is no longer the protector of children."³¹ Especially Jane Austen provides a vivid picture of what fathers were like in her time. According to Seignereut, Jane Austen was very afraid of any kind of social relations that could not be combined with her pastoral world. The female English writer's "greatest fear is that the continuity of personal history may be lost if that pastoral world (protected by "fathers") is contaminated."³² In the novel "*Emma*", the reader encounters Jane Austen's most authoritarian father figure, Mr. John Knightly, who has the last word on everything connected with the family. He insists that leaving the arcadian existence of Highbury is mere foolishness. As a consequence, Emma and Mr. Knightly experience mistrust from the people around them. Activities outside the family are avoided whenever possible and

²⁸ Cf., Seignereut, *Great Father*, 556.

²⁹ Seignereut, *Great Father*, 550.

³⁰ Cf., Frenzel, *Vater-Sohn-Konflikt*, 737.

³¹ Seignereut, *Great Father*, 551.

³² Seignereut, *Great Father*, 551.

strangers are kept at a certain distance. However, throughout the novel no hint can be found at the father's power reaching beyond his home and family.

Charles Dickens's novels are more typical of 19th century literature: here fathers are strongly prominent in their absence. All the children appearing in the author's works are orphans and therefore suffering from this loss in their lives, created by their fathers they miss. Seigneuret explains that "[w]ithout family support, without the guidance of a trustworthy mentor (...), without the personal resources to repulse a morally corrosive world, the orphaned child in Dickens is an embodiment of panic over father loss."³³ In the chapter "*Great Father*", Seigneuret argues that "[f]ather absence [is] a transformed and diminished version of the great father, (...)"³⁴, a variety of the father-son conflict discussed extensively by Elisabeth Frenzel in her book "*Motive der Weltliteratur*" ("*Motifs of World Literature*"): very frequently the son who has never met his father leaves his home to find him, primarily to learn more about his origin and therefore to develop into an independent, mature being.³⁵ The search for the father is a motif that has been dealt with from antiquity to the present and it is usually applied to a son looking for his unknown father, but rarely to a daughter.³⁶

Also the 20th century is merely concerned with the issue of paternal authority and its effect on the family, among which is the loss of paternal authority as we encounter it, for instance, in Thomas Mann's "*The Buddenbrooks*". James Joyce's "*Ulysses*" is one of the most famous examples for the figure of the father as seen at that time:

"[It is a] new father [who] encompasses father absence, the sense of loss, but does so without the obligatory tragic assumptions that accompany father loss in *Jude* [and the hero in James Joyce's novel the hero] Leopold Bloom is (...) a religious, philosophical, cultural, historical, and psychological representation of paternity."³⁷

Seigneuret argues that the Great Father that we are confronted with in Greek mythology changes completely throughout the centuries so that the father is no

³³ Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 551.

³⁴ Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 554.

³⁵ Cf., Frenzel, *Vatersuche*, 745 ff.

³⁶ Cf., Seignereut, *Search For Father*, 1141.

³⁷ Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 555-559.

longer the only source of power, order and authority within the family.³⁸ In the course of the psychologizing of literature – triggered by Sigmund Freud³⁹ – it needs to be emphasized that sexuality plays a major role in the father-son conflict: Frenzel argues that growing independence from the father could also be connected with the son's sexual maturity.⁴⁰

Having considered some aspects of the father-son conflict and the figure of the father in world literature it is now possible to proceed with the main task of this M.A.-Thesis: analyzing the figure of the father in three selected novels by the Irish writer John McGahern.

³⁸ Cf., Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 556.

³⁹ Cf., Seigneuret, *Great Father*, 930.

⁴⁰ Cf., Frenzel, *Vater-Sohn-Konflikt*, 743.

2. THE BARRACKS

2.1. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVE

“*The Barracks*” was John McGahern’s first novel, published in 1963.⁴¹ He wrote this novel while he was working as a teacher in County Dublin.⁴² It is the only one of his works in which a woman is the protagonist.⁴³

As the Irish writer John McGahern, born on 12 Nov 1934 in the capital of the Republic of Ireland⁴⁴, was usually more interested in “the ordinary, or the boring (...) [than] in the exciting or the spectacular”⁴⁵, “*The Barracks*” is not much focused on a series of events, but rather concerned with the spiritual development which the female protagonist, Elizabeth Reegan, experiences in the course of the story. As it is typical of John McGahern’s fiction and the central interest in the stories he wanted to tell, the plot is rather simple and without suspense. However, the reader who derives pleasure from an “intensive treatment of the characters’ emotional life”⁴⁶ is well advised to read a novel like “*The Barracks*”. What makes his literary work even more interesting is the fact that “[t]he experiences [John McGahern] write[s] out of are [his] experiences. That’s a given, like the material, like being Irish. It’s what you do with those experiences that counts.”⁴⁷

As the Irish author, the oldest of seven children⁴⁸, spent many years of his childhood and youth in the Counties Monaghan, Leitrim and Roscommon, he knows how to present Irish rural life to his readership:⁴⁹

⁴¹ Cf., Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 139-154.

⁴² González, Rosa. “John McGahern, interviewed by Rosa González”. *Ireland in Writing*. Ed.: C.C. Barfoot, Hans Bertens, Theo D’haen and Erik Kooper. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. 39-50.

⁴³ Kennedy, Eileen. “The Novels of John McGahern: The Road Away Becomes the Road Back”. *Contemporary Irish Writing*. Ed.: James D. Brophy and Raymond J. Porter. New Rochelle, NY: Iona College Press, 1983. 95-114.

⁴⁴ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 139.

⁴⁵ Kennedy, *The Novels*, 8.

⁴⁶ González, *Ireland in Writing*, 39-50.

⁴⁷ Mike Murphy, “John McGahern”. *Reading the Future. Irish Writers in Conversation With Mike Murphy*. Ed. Clíodhna Ní Anluain, 154.

⁴⁸ Cf., Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 140.

⁴⁹ Cf., González, *Ireland in Writing*, 39-50.

People did not live in Ireland then. They lived in small, intense communities which often varied greatly in spirit and character over the course of even a few miles. Part of the pain of emigration was that the small communities they had left were more real to the emigrants than the places where their lives were happening and where their children were growing up with alien accents. There was a hidden bitterness, but sometimes it was not so hidden. (...) In the communities, the local and the individual were more powerful than any national identity, (...).⁵⁰

In his autobiography we learn that John McGahern spoke from experience: as his mother was a teacher she had to move across the country several times in order to fulfill her duty at different schools. Coming to a new place “was like moving to a different country”⁵¹ as each was like a little world of its own.

In another interview with the Irish author, he also talks about the society he grew up in. In this society, the family was the most important aspect of Irish life at all. Therefore, the family appears to be “one of the most recurrent themes in contemporary Irish fiction”.⁵² In this interview, John McGahern argues that Ireland lacks a system of manners. As a consequence, every Irish family appears to establish its own system of manners, which has consequences on Irish society in general:

(...) I see the family as a sort of interesting half-way house between the individual on one side and a larger society on the other hand, and one is not alone, and one is in a society but it's not a true society, since certain things will be tolerated within a family that won't be tolerated in a larger society.⁵³

As John McGahern seems to have been shaped by the society he grew up in, it does not come as a great surprise that autobiographical elements have a strong tendency to appear throughout the novels discussed in this thesis. For instance, “the Roscommon/Leitrim border-country takes on a prominent position since it is in this part of the West of Ireland that the author spent his youth (...)”.⁵⁴

The story of “*The Barracks*” is set in an Irish village in the countryside, west of the famous Irish river Shannon. There, Sergeant Reegan, a handsome though

⁵⁰ McGahern, John. *Memoir*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005, 210-211.

⁵¹ McGahern, *Memoir*, 16.

⁵² González, *Ireland in Writing*, 42.

⁵³ Gonzalez, *Ireland in Writing*, 42.

⁵⁴ Kamm, Jürgen. “John McGahern”. *Contemporary Irish Novelists*. Ed. Rüdiger Imhof. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1990, 175-193.

unpredictable policeman⁵⁵ in his midforties, lives with his second wife Elizabeth, a woman in her early forties, and his three children from his first marriage in the local barracks.⁵⁶ Because the Irish novelist experienced life at the barracks – with his father – himself, he knows how to present his readership a vital, realistic and detailed picture of the conditions under which people lived.⁵⁷

John McGahern's first novel covers the last sixteen months in the protagonist's life after discovering cancerous cysts in her breasts.⁵⁸ The reader then accompanies Elizabeth on her journey of reflection and inward growth, a journey on which Elizabeth remembers her life before she married Sergeant Reegan. In a series of interior monologs and flashbacks, she remembers formative experiences she had in her past⁵⁹ and also reflects on the people around her as well as on her rural surroundings, from which she feels as alienated as from her family. It appears to be painful that Elizabeth is unable to be regarded as a second mother by her Reegan's three children. This the reader learns right at the beginning of the novel:

“What does it matter what blind was down or not down? – only give me a little peace for once,” was on her lips when her name, her Christian name – Elizabeth – struck at her out of the child's appeal. She was nothing to the children. She had hoped (...) that they would look up to her as a second mother, but they had not. Then in her late thirties, she had believed that she could yet have a child of her own, and that, too, had come to nothing. At least, she thought, these children were not afraid of her, they did not hate her. So she gripped herself together and spoke pleasantly to them: (...)”⁶⁰

Apart from the fact that Reegan's children, Sheila, Una and Willie, keep their distance to their stepmother, Elizabeth also feels let down by her husband, who is completely absorbed by the constant fights with his Superintendent Quirke and his hated job at the police.⁶¹ Despite this, Elizabeth feels frequently lucky to have married him, even though she is sometimes certain that he only married her to have a housekeeper and a mother for his children.⁶² Although Reegan appears to

⁵⁵ McGahern, John. *The Barracks*. London: Faber and Faber, 2008, 23.

⁵⁶ Cf., Kennedy, *The Novels*, 116.

⁵⁷ Cf., Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 177.

⁵⁸ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 213.

⁵⁹ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 213.

⁶⁰ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 8.

⁶¹ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 214.

⁶² Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 13.

feel a lot of affection for his second wife, he might have also married her to have a housekeeper and a mother for his three little children. Especially in an Irish context, this does not come as a great surprise when reading the following passage in the Irish Constitution:

1° In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2° The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.⁶³

The Irish Constitution of 1937 as well as the Roman Catholic Church promoted “the mother as the natural focus of attention and affection”⁶⁴ for a long time. However, it was the father who was expected to represent the house and to practice authority within his home and family.⁶⁵ In this context it appears to be important to explain that Elizabeth Reegan does not only serve one of the most important principles of the Irish Constitution – despite her unusual independence and ability to assert herself – but she also shows some signs of a typical Irish woman herself:

Elizabeth Reegan is a symbol of many of the distinctive qualities of Irish women. She has great inner strength, a capacity to suffer in silence. Her husband needs to unburden himself of his problems. She is the stronger of the two, the more resourceful. She accepts the limits of her existence, does not ask for the impossible.⁶⁶

She appears to be the opposite of her frustrated husband who is obsessed with his permanent fights with his Superior which could be primarily due to the fact that Reegan was in a powerful position in the Irish War of Independence and therefore used to being obeyed instead of obeying. Elizabeth, however, is able to listen to her husband’s complaints, though she sometimes has difficulties doing so. Rather she is capable of appreciating life as it is and also of accepting things which cannot be changed.

⁶³ <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?docID=243>, 19 April, 2008.

⁶⁴ Holland, Siobhán, “Re-Citing the Rosary: Women, Catholicism and Agency in Brian Moore’s *Cold Heaven* and John McGahern’s *Amongst Women*” . *Contemporary Irish Fiction. Themes, Tropes, Theories*. Ed. Liam Harte and Michael Parker. Basingstoke: Macmillian, 2000. 56-78.

⁶⁵ Cf., Holland, *Re-Citing the Rosary*, 71.

⁶⁶ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 146.

Apart from love, Elizabeth seems to have had reasons for marrying him as well: when they first met four years before the beginning of the novel, she had just returned home from London, where she had been working as a nurse through the London Blitz in World War II. Elizabeth was exhausted after a stressful time of nursing as well as from a failed affair with Doctor Halliday. Back home in Ireland, she wanted “to come to the barracks to get some of her papers put in order”⁶⁷. At this place she met her future husband to whom she felt attracted immediately. During her stay on her mother’s and brother’s farm she experienced their opposition against her marrying Sergeant Reegan: her brother would have needed a housekeeper as well as a nurse for their mother who died three months before the story of “*The Barracks*” begins. Elizabeth, who turns out to be an unusually independent woman, married the policeman Reegan in spite of the opposition of her family:

She was determined to grasp at a life of her own desiring, no longer content to drag through with her repetitive days, neither happy nor unhappy, merely passing them in the wearying spirit of service; (...). She’d not stay on this small farm among the hills, shut away from living (...). She would marry Reegan, or she’d go back to London (...).⁶⁸

From this one can safely conclude that Elizabeth desperately wanted to escape the monotony and frustration of her life back then – only to experience all this again in her marriage: throughout the first chapters of this novel, John McGahern succeeds in describing the boredom of Elizabeth’s life in which she merely pursues her tasks in the household. However, the woman appears to be happy with her existence – at least sometimes – as we learn in the novel:

Her woman’s days had no need of change. They were full and too busy, wanting nothing but to be loved. There was the shrill alarm clock at eight in the barracks morning and the raking of the ashes over the living coals close to midnight: these two instants, as between tides, came the treating nights of renewal and the chores of the days on which her strength was spent again, one always unfinished and two more eternally waiting, yet so colourless and small that only on a reel of film projected slowly could they be separated and named; and as no one noticed them they were never praised.⁶⁹

This monotony of her marital life is dramatically changed by the diagnosis of breast cancer: in chapter four Elizabeth is taken to hospital for closer

⁶⁷ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 13.

⁶⁸ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 15 ff.

⁶⁹ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 21.

examination⁷⁰: Elizabeth Reagan talks to herself in soliloquies, which aids her in freeing herself a little from the burden of her terminal disease and the fact that she feels let down by her frustrated husband and the boring routine of her everyday life. However, the main character of this novel lives on her life, doing the household tasks, caring for her three stepchildren and listening to her husband. Dangerous are only those moments which she has for herself.⁷¹ In such moments she has deep thoughts of her past, her present life and life in general:

The starkness of individual minutes passing through accidental doors and windows and chairs and flowers and trees, cigarette smoke or the light growing brilliant and fading losing their pain, gathered into oneness in the vision of her whole life passing in its total mystery. A girl child growing up on a small farm, the blood of puberty, the shock of the first sexual act, the long years in London, her marriage back into this enclosed place happening as would her death in moments where cigarettes were smoked. No one, not even herself, could measure it by slide or rule.⁷²

Reading this passage evokes the feeling that many things in the Ireland of this time could not be discussed: sexuality, physical and therefore natural functions, feelings connected with these very human developments.

In a later passage, the reader learns that Reagan's pet name for Elizabeth is "girl", a pet name comforting enough to make her feel "no longer a woman growing old. She wasn't conscious of herself any more, (...), for she was needed."⁷³ Calling his wife "girl" may appear to be a very affectionate way of showing one's love. However, at the same time it appears to be like a father talking to his child, his little girl who should – if possible – stay a girl forever, a state which Elizabeth seems to be longing for, particularly since she is terminally ill and "couldn't let go of these things, it was inconceivable that she could die!"⁷⁴. Despite such moments of love and tenderness, Elizabeth is very well aware of the fact that she has to see a doctor to check the cysts in her breasts, which she discovered the summer before. As a nurse she has no illusions about what the cysts in her breasts mean – cancer. The doctor would send her for closer examination and in the end she would have to stay in hospital for treatment.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 213-237.

⁷¹ Cf., Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 143.

⁷² McGahern, *The Barracks*, 59.

⁷³ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 32.

⁷⁴ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 119.

⁷⁵ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 34.

The reason why the former nurse hesitates to inform her husband and her three stepchildren about her physical complaints, one can safely infer from a passage in the novel in which the female protagonist remembers a cousin's wedding in Dublin to which she had an invitation. Although she did not want to go, her husband and his children tried to assure her that she could go – they would manage without her very well, as Reegan's son Willie told her back then: "Didn't we manage for ages before you ever came?"⁷⁶ Nobody of the family, especially not the children, would miss her, probably the most important reason for Elizabeth not to see a doctor. Going to hospital would mean to leave home without being missed.⁷⁷ In chapter two, however, the physical pain becomes unbearable, and Elizabeth asks her husband to make an appointment with the doctor on his way to Circuit Court. Sergeant Reegan agrees to do so and even suggests – actually insists on – having the doctor come to the barracks. This is rejected by Elizabeth to avoid trouble.⁷⁸ The children are shocked about Elizabeth's going to the doctor, and Reegan himself is deeply worried about his wife as he already lost his first wife:

She hadn't been a day ill in bed since they were married. Her haggard appearance, her wanting to see the doctor, disturbed him with the memory of his first wife who died in childbirth. Elizabeth could not die, he told himself; it was impossible that two could die; it would be ludicrous.⁷⁹

This is one of the rare moments in the novel in which the reader gains some insight into Reegan's feelings for and worries about his wife. Elizabeth, however, is probably longing for a moment in which he commits himself to her. Instead, she is afraid her husband could be worried about hospital bills and other costs connected with her disease:

Elizabeth couldn't take her eyes off Reegan. What was he thinking? His face was a mask. Was he fed up with her? Was he thinking of the hospital bills? Was he thinking that this was another shackle to hold him longer in the police? Was he regretting ever marrying her?⁸⁰

After Elizabeth's death and funeral, Reegan checks the amount of the money he has been saving over a longer period of time. Indeed he notices that his deceased wife's illness, hospital stays and her funeral have cost a lot of money, money he

⁷⁶ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 35.

⁷⁷ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 34 ff.

⁷⁸ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 46.

⁷⁹ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 47.

⁸⁰ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 101.

was planning to spend on a farm that would release him from his hated work at the police.⁸¹ John McGahern's father, a very choleric and greedy man, had similar considerations in mind when his wife Susan suffered from breast cancer. Susan was always very cautious in order not to annoy him:

What emerges [when John McGahern's parents discussed selling the house in letters] is that [Susan] is more interested in divining his wishes and agreeing with them than in offering any opinion of her own. She also has to face his anxiety over her medical bills, and assures him she has taken an ordinary ward because it is less expensive.⁸²

When Reegan and the children are gone, Elizabeth has a moment to herself, a moment in which she starts to reflect on her situation seriously: she asks herself existential questions like why she married Reegan and what the sense of life truly is.⁸³ In a series of flashbacks and retrospective views, the reader is able to join Elizabeth on the journey of her spiritual development, during which she seems to come to terms with her past, her present state as well as with her impending death caused by cancer. Apart from fearing death, she is also able to enjoy various moments she has in the course of the novel:

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, the fields of the hill always white and the radio aerial that went across from the window to the high branches of the sycamore a pure white line through the air.⁸⁴

Although the reader can intensely feel how scared Elizabeth is of the consequences of her disease it is also obvious that she is well capable of seeing the joys life has in store and how to enjoy them. One of these joys is the beautiful Irish countryside, which has been utilized in Irish literature ever since. However, in John McGahern's writings it is not used for sentimental reasons but to show how nature forms a part of people's lives as they are "saving the hay, cutting the corn, working in the bog."⁸⁵ Eamon Maher argues that the Irish novelist used the Irish landscape and countryside to show how they help people to bear the daily

⁸¹ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 226.

⁸² McGahern, *Memoir*, 38.

⁸³ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 49.

⁸⁴ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 170.

⁸⁵ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 152.

drudgeries of life a little better.⁸⁶ Also in Elizabeth's case we can notice how much more bearable her last days are thanks to the beautiful nature around her. Still, however, she does not seem to find a satisfactory answer to her question of what the sense of life really is, as Jürgen Kamm argues in his essay about John McGahern: "If there is a meaning to life, she muses shortly before her death, it remains concealed because it is beyond the limits of human understanding."⁸⁷ As already pointed out, Elizabeth – in contrast to her frustrated husband – is capable of accepting that some things in life will never be fully understood.

As mentioned above, "*The Barracks*" is the only of John McGahern's works in which a woman is the protagonist of the story. Consequently, at first sight it appears to be not so obvious to analyze the figure of the father in this piece of literature. However, it seems to be reasonable to consider further men in this novel – priests, doctors, and the father as a husband /the husband as a father, a former lover – as varieties of the father figure as well. These men are in the societal position to teach others, to guide them, to explain the world to the people around them – regardless whether they are called their "sheep", their "children", their "patients", or even their "wives".

2.2. THE FATHER FIGURE IN "THE BARRACKS"

2.2.1. THE PRIEST AS FATHER FIGURE IN "THE BARRACKS"

Despite the fact that Elizabeth, a woman in her early forties⁸⁸, is the protagonist in this novel, the male characters can indeed serve as examples of father figure in John McGahern's novels and display some similarities to the writer's father as described in his last book "*Memoir*". Apart from Elizabeth's husband, the father of her three stepchildren and, therefore, the most obvious father figure, other male figures assume the role of fathers in this novel as well. Even the priest, who tries to win Elizabeth Reegan for the local branch of the Legion of Mary, a Catholic

⁸⁶ Cf., Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 152.

⁸⁷ Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 179.

⁸⁸ Cf., Kennedy, *The Novels*, 95-114.

organization, can be seen as a father figure in a metaphoric sense. To Elizabeth the Legion of Mary is merely “a kind of legalized gossiping school to the women and a convenient pool of labour that the priests could draw on for catering committees. (...), all the Catholics of the parish attended to their duties, (...).”⁸⁹ Elizabeth, who is a remarkably independent woman for the Ireland of the first half of the 20th century, refuses politely and then firmly when the priest appears to be unable to let go. He tries to persuade her to join the Legion:

“Come on, Mrs. Reegan,” (...) “All the other policemen’s wives are joined. It’s one of the most extraordinary and powerful organizations in the world, (...). Do you know, (...), it was organized on exactly the same pattern as Communism: (...); and even in this humble parish of ours we must try to do our bit. Come on, Mrs. Reegan! You don’t want us to coax you all that much.”⁹⁰

Elizabeth asserts herself, annoyed by “the half-patronizing, half-bullying tone, (...) [because for this] she’d been too short a time out of London.”⁹¹ When the priest notices that the former nurse Elizabeth would probably not change her mind, he tries other tactics:

“So, my dear woman, you dislike the Catholic Church: it happens to be an organization, you know, that’s founded on Divine Truth,” he countered quickly and she was taken aback; but she saw [...], the personal fall it’d be if he didn’t make her join now.”⁹²

When the priest notices – after trying to win her several more times – that it is impossible to evoke feelings of guilt in her in order to follow societal conventions, he finally gives up trying to teach her a lesson.⁹³ Apparently, this “child” has got her own head, which guarantees her the position of a respected outsider in the rural community she is part of.⁹⁴ However, they are meant to meet again. On Elizabeth’s deathbed, it is this very priest who gives her the Extreme Unction:

He was kind, now that she was ill, but she continued to dislike him, their first meeting and clash was deep in her mind and it would never leave it. She had always found her first instinctive reaction to people right, [...]. She tried never to let this priest close. In the confessional she put everything into formula. [...]⁹⁵

⁸⁹ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 163.

⁹⁰ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 163.

⁹¹ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 163.

⁹² McGahern, *The Barracks*, 163.

⁹³ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 164.

⁹⁴ Cf., Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 175 -193.

⁹⁵ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 217.

As explained, Elizabeth does not react conventionally when the priest approaches her. When she refuses to join the Legion of Mary because of the reasons mentioned above, this “[has] assured her the position of a respected outsider among the villagers.”⁹⁶ However, if she was not the local sergeant’s wife, things would possibly be different and she would be completely detached from her social environment.

2.2.2. SERGEANT REEGAN AS FATHER FIGURE IN “THE BARRACKS”

Sergeant Reagan, Elizabeth’s husband and a man of 45 years⁹⁷, does not seem to possess such strong character traits as John McGahern’s father. There are, however, some patterns of behavior for which Sergeant Francis McGahern⁹⁸ appears to have been the model. However, Reagan does not seem to possess a character as unpleasant as John McGahern’s father.

After the doctor has revealed that Elizabeth suffers from breast cancer and has to go to hospital for closer examination, not only Sergeant Reagan but also the children freeze:

Their own mother had gone to hospital years ago and never came back. [...] [At the funeral the children] had asked, “When is Mammy coming back from heaven?”
“When God tells her. Very soon, if you pray to God.”⁹⁹

In a similar though more insensitive way, John McGahern’s father kept the whereabouts of his mother from his eldest son and his siblings when Susan was in hospital for closer examination due to her breast cancer. When asked about his wife Susan, McGahern’s mother, he repeatedly warned his children not to ask but to pray for her. Looking back, the famous Irish author remembers that “[t]o veil everything in secrecy and darkness was natural to my father, and it turned out that my mother was far from happy with this secrecy.”¹⁰⁰ This John McGahern

⁹⁶ Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 177.

⁹⁷ Cf., Kennedy, *The Novels*, 95-114.

⁹⁸ Cf., McGahern, John. *Memoir*, 3.

⁹⁹ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 103 ff.

¹⁰⁰ McGahern, *Memoir*, 35.

regarded as pathological behavior of his father in his “*Memoir*”.¹⁰¹ Additionally, McGahern’s father appears to have been easily insulted as well as envious of other people’s success: when “*The Barracks*” was published, John McGahern sent his father a prepublication copy of his first novel, as he did not want his father to get the impression of being excluded. In this context the Irish novelist once emphasized that Reegan, the father in “*The Barracks*”, does not resemble Francis McGahern at all, as Reegan is not only a lot more uncomplicated but also way more attractive. Whether Francis enjoyed reading his son’s novel or not, McGahern never knew:

He seems to have read the first page: ‘Dear Sean, Thanks for the book received. An old etc garda sergeant sits here in the darkhoping that the lamp will show light or at least flicker. Daddy.’ He never spoke about it again.¹⁰²

As the father of one of Ireland’s greatest novelists appears to have been a rather childish man, it does not come as a surprise that he ignored his son’s success as much possible. When he found out that his eldest child was trying his hand on writing, he advised him to copy John D. Sheridan’s style, a reviewer of the *Irish Independent* who Sergeant McGahern adored. After Sheridan had discussed “*The Barracks*” in his column, his name was never mentioned again¹⁰³ – a behavior which resembles much of Moran’s in “*Amongst Women*”, which will be discussed at the end of this M.A.-thesis.

Some other character features Reegan appears to share with John McGahern’s father are his unpredictability and aggressiveness when things do not work out as planned as well as his greed for money. His children know his moods very well. When he comes home at the beginning of the story they grow quiet. Reegan, troubled by his constant fights with his Superintendent Quirke and sick of obeying authority, feels very sorry for himself “and would fly into a passion of reproaches if he got any provocation.”¹⁰⁴ However, the difference lies in the fact that Reegan seems to be way less violent and gruesome than McGahern’s father was: there is not even one sentence in “*The Barracks*” that suggests that Reegan applies

¹⁰¹ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 57.

¹⁰² McGahern, *Memoir*, 245.

¹⁰³ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 245.

¹⁰⁴ McGahern, *Memoir*, 11.

physical violence, neither to his wife nor to his children. In contrast to this, Sergeant McGahern must have been feared in his house:

There did not have to be a reason. The blows could come out of a moment of irritation or misunderstanding. (...) I suspect there was something sexual in his violence, because the blows could flare up on nothing, and afterwards it was hard to trace them to a cause.¹⁰⁵

These violent moments of rage, the frustration, the difficulty accepting authority might result from the fact that Sergeant McGahern, the role model for various of John McGahern's father figures in his novels, was a veteran of the War of Independence, like Reegan in "*The Barracks*" and Moran in "*Amongst Women*". McGahern, Reegan and Moran are disappointed in the country they once fought for as young, idealistic men in the IRA.¹⁰⁶ In a very interesting and personal interview with the Irish writer, he is asked about the father figures in his fiction and the fact that they "channel the frustrated revolutionary energies of their youth into patriarchal authoritarianism."¹⁰⁷ Apparently, a connection between the political frustration over the outcome of the Irish Civil War and Irish male domestic violence and tyranny can be established. In an interview John McGahern agrees with this theory:

I think that in a way that generation, that is, the generation before mine, a lot of them were revolutionaries, and of course, in a way the revolution never happened. You know, a revolution did happen, they walked free from England, but nothing changed and these people were very disillusioned. But then it was a very paternalistic society, and then when the British move out still the Catholic Church got control, and the Catholic Church was by nature paternalistic.¹⁰⁸

Fighting to free one's country and then seeing a part of it remaining with the hated British rule must have left its scars on a proud heroic ego like the one of Sergeant McGahern, Reegan or Moran, the male main character in John McGahern's last novel "*Amongst Women*". Reegan, for instance, reacts to this by withdrawing into himself.¹⁰⁹

As mentioned before, Reegan appears to be the least tyrannical of the father figures analyzed and compared in this M.A.-thesis. Nevertheless, he as well seems

¹⁰⁵ McGahern, *Memoir*, 190.

¹⁰⁶ Cf., Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 139-154.

¹⁰⁷ González, *Ireland in Writing*, 39-50.

¹⁰⁸ González, *Ireland in Writing*, 39-50.

¹⁰⁹ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 213-237.

to be unable to accept authority and cannot help becoming furious at his Superintendent Quirke. Because Reagan is so absorbed by his problems with his superior, a man from whom he has to accept orders but who he is unable to respect, he is incapable of supporting his terminally ill wife.¹¹⁰ The major reason for his frustration with his job at the police and his Superintendent Quirke might be the fact that as a former fighter in the War of Independence he was in the powerful position of *giving* orders instead of receiving them from others:¹¹¹

(...) he'd been born into a generation wild with ideals: they'd free Ireland, they'd be a nation once again: he was fighting with a flying column in the hills when he was little more than a boy, he donned the uniform of the Garda Siochana and swore to preserve the peace of The Irish Free State when it was declared in 1920, (...) [and] there he stayed – to watch the Civil War and the years that followed in silent disgust, remaining on because he saw nothing else worth doing. (...). [Now] [h]e was obeying officers younger than himself, he who had been in charge of ambushes before he was twenty.¹¹²

Susan McGahern received as little attention and support from her husband as Elizabeth does: when John McGahern's father understood that his wife was dying, he simply comes to clear the house, takes his children away to the barracks and leaves his dying wife behind.¹¹³

In the article "*Contemporary Irish Writing*" Eileen Kennedy describes Sergeant Reagan as "hot-headed and sardonic, a man born to authority – he had fed on the wild ideals of the Irish Free State – but hounded now by a self-important Superintendent whom he hates."¹¹⁴ The inability to accept authority combined with a superior he is unable to respect and the fact that his native country Ireland did not turn out to be what he had fought for as a young man leads Reagan to strongly desire to leave the police, to take up farming and to be his own boss.¹¹⁵ Incapable of accepting his situation, he cannot stop complaining about the ongoing arguments with his superior at the police, which he appears to provoke. While his wife Elizabeth keeps to herself and is mature enough to accept life as it

¹¹⁰ Maher, Eamon. „Catholicism in the Writings of John McGahern.“ *Engaging Modernity. Readings of Irish Politics, Culture and Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Ed. Michael Böss and Eamon Maher. Dublin: Veritas, 2003, 85-96.

¹¹¹ Cf., Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 139-154.

¹¹² McGahern, *The Barracks*, 109.

¹¹³ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 122-123.

¹¹⁴ Kennedy, *The Novels*, 116.

¹¹⁵ Cf., Kennedy, *The Novels*, 116.

is, Reegan needs to unburden himself and to describe every fight – no matter how meaningless – with his Superintendent John James Quirke in every little detail:

“And you’d never guess who I met?” he went reluctantly on.

“Who?”

“The bastard Quirke.”

“The Superintendent!” (...) What had him out, do you think?”

“He was lakin’ for a chance he didn’t get, you can be sure!”

He began to recount the clash, speaking with a slow, gloating passion and constant mimicry.

“He stopped in front of me and pulled down the window and asked, ‘Is that you, Reegan?’

“ ‘That’s me, sir,’ says I.

“ ‘And is there some trouble?’

“ ‘No, sir,’ says I.

“ ‘And what has you out on a night like this?’

“ ‘I’m out on patrol, sir,’ says I.

“ ‘But are you mad, Reegan? Are you stone mad? No man in his senses would be out cycling on a night like this without grave reason. Good God, Reegan, don’t you realize that all rules and regulations yield at a certain point to human discretion? Do you want to get your death, man, cycling about on a night like this?’

“ ‘Aye, aye, sirs,’ says I. ‘But I’ll not get the sack, sir.’ “

(...)

“That shuk him! That’s what tuk the wind outa his sails! That’s what shut him up, believe me!”

Then he repeated Quirke in a high, squeaky voice, the accent so outrageously exaggerated that it no longer resembled anything human.¹¹⁶

Later, when his colleague Casey comes over, Reegan recounts the whole story, which his wife Elizabeth is already sick of hearing:

“And tell me, did you meet anything strange or startlin’ on your travels, Sergeant?”

“Aye!” Reegan tried to joke. “I met something all right - whether you can call it strange or startlin’ or not is another matter.”

He was attempting a levity he didn’t feel, it left greater feeling of anger and frustration behind it than violent speech.

“What did you meet with, Sergeant?”

“Did you ever hear of His Imperial Majesty, John James Quirke? Did you?”

“Jay,” Casey exclaimed in real amazement. “You never met the Super, did you? What was takin’ him out on an evenin’ like this?”

Reegan began to recount the clash; and it had become more extravagant, more comic and vicious since the first telling. When he finished he shouted, “That shuk him, believe me! That’s what tuk the wind outa his sails!” and as he shouted he tried to catch Casey’s face unaware, trying to read into his mind.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 12-13.

¹¹⁷ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 19-20.

Obviously, Reegan is a man who is incapable of letting go and accepting things the way they are: unable to realize and acknowledge that he is only harming himself, he continues provoking Quirke and telling about the constant fights with his superior. Not even when his wife is taken to hospital can he bring himself to overcome his pride to ask his Superintendent for a day off to support Elizabeth.¹¹⁸ However, Reegan appears to be wise enough to provoke his superior within limits so that dismissing him is unlikely and Reegan still has the opportunity to decide himself when it is time to leave the police. Elizabeth tries to advise her husband to be careful, because in the end it is Quirke who is in the more powerful position.¹¹⁹ In the last chapter Sergeant Reegan finally achieves his goal¹²⁰: after Elizabeth's premature death due to breast cancer, he writes his resignation from the police and seems to have beaten his superior.

When he asks them about their homework, Reegan advises his children Sheila, Una, and Willie to fight authorities and tells them to "[b]e able to puzzle the schoolmaster!"¹²¹ In spite of her deep feelings for her husband, she sometimes wonders why she married him:

Was that love a simple longing for security, (...) ? Was it because of Reegan? He was a strange man, lonely and different, she'd always believed; she'd never understood him much and had lived somewhat near to fear of him. There was such a vital passion about him sometimes, and then again he often seemed perverse and stupid.¹²²

Despite all her doubts, Elizabeth acknowledges that every person is a world of his/her own and that there is probably no way of changing others – and no point either.¹²³ However, the female protagonist of "*The Barracks*" gives the reader the impression of regretting that she knows so little about her husband and that she has experienced only a few moments of real intimacy with him, apart from physical closeness.¹²⁴ In her repeated reflections on her life, past as well as present, she realizes soon that her husband has always been a stranger to her:

¹¹⁸ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 102.

¹¹⁹ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 189-190.

¹²⁰ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 226-232.

¹²¹ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 21-22.

¹²² McGahern, *The Barracks*, 210.

¹²³ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 215.

¹²⁴ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 64.

As in most of McGahern's depictions of married couples, the Reegans enjoy little intimacy other than the occasional physical coupling. Their relationship is probably typical of many marriages of the time in Ireland. (...) There wasn't any time for deep conversations. Life imposed too many demands for idle talk to interfere with routine.¹²⁵

When Elizabeth is already confined to her sick-bed, she realizes again how little intimacy she has enjoyed with her husband and how "she [even] has kept the roll of money that would allow her to leave Reagan for London whenever she wanted or found it necessary to do so: (...)"¹²⁶

In one of his interviews John McGahern explains how intimacy in Irish marriages came to be feared in his native country: although the popular Irish author felt comfortable as a member of the Catholic Church throughout his life, he also assumed that it was the Church who did the most serious damage to Irish people's relationship to sex and intimacy. As nearly everything was considered a sin, (sex was to be practiced only within marriage and even then only for the reproduction of as many children as possible), the two sexes usually learned to lead lives apart from each other: while it was a wife's business to rear the children and to do the household, the husband spent most of his time outside the house, in his job or on the fields.¹²⁷

As mentioned before, Reagan is obsessed with his permanent conflicts with his superior, so obsessed that at times he appears to forget about his wife and his three little children, even when he is already informed about Elizabeth's cancerous cysts in her breasts. In an attempt to be able to leave the police and to buy a farm, he wants to sell turf and to provide costumers with fuel, which takes up much of his time. While he is dreaming about how much money he will have saved until a certain point of time, he appears to forget that his terminally ill wife still exists and is in need of her husband's support and affection:

This year he had secured the contract to supply all the fuel to the laundry the Sisters of Mercy ran in the town, (...) and if it went lucky he'd have enough money to buy a good farm, he'd be his own master, (...). So he whiled away most of the winter evenings dreaming on paper over the root facts the figures these contracts provided. He never

¹²⁵ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 144.

¹²⁶ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 214.

¹²⁷ Cf., Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 137 -157.

noticed how drawn and beaten Elizabeth looked: she'd have to collapse before he'd ever noticed.¹²⁸

2.2.3. SUPERINTENDENT QUIRKE AS FATHER FIGURE IN “THE BARRACKS”

In this context also Superintendent John James Quirke might serve as a kind of father figure in John McGahern's *“The Barracks”*: towards the end of this novel Reegan is caught by Quirke who finds out that Reegan should actually be on patrol. Reegan tries to convince his superior that he simply forgot about it. While the Superintendent is trying to explain that it is alright *this time*, he lectures him on the police's reputation and how every single policeman is responsible to build up and keep a good reputation and positive image of the police.¹²⁹ He as a superior is in the position – like a father – to give advice as well as orders. Depending on the father in one way or the other, “children” have to accept this. However, sooner or later children start to struggle for freedom to make their own decisions. Possibly Reegan tries to prove to his superior that he can well manage without him – maybe even better than with him.

On top of Reegan's list is the aim to quit the hated job at the police and to buy a farm in order to be his own boss¹³⁰, another idea the policeman appears to be obsessed with. To enable himself to leave the police, he needs to save as much money as possible, which is the reason why he works so hard at the turf-banks of which he hopes they will earn him enough money to fulfill his plans. To achieve his aim he even enslaves his three children to help him with the turf after school. Elizabeth soon notices how much the children suffer from this heavy work and tries to make her husband see, what he is doing to them. To Reegan, this is just incomprehensible as “[h]ard work never killed anybody [and he] was doing almost a man's work at their age and [he] never saw it do anybody any harm. Laziness and idleness was all [he] ever saw do harm.”¹³¹ Apparently, Reegan is so eager to fulfill contracts to earn enough money to purchase a farm that he

¹²⁸ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 189.

¹²⁹ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 129-133.

¹³⁰ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 110.

¹³¹ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 141.

completely forgets about his children and his wife, who seems to be the only one who notices how much her stepchildren suffer. John McGahern is successful in describing vividly how greedy Reegan grows, how intensely he forces himself to do as much work as he is able to do and how dangerously he neglects his work at the police:

He forced himself on and on, he could always find energy, so fierce this passion to get money and his freedom that it drove him like a whiplash. Only in the drawn sag of his face when he relaxed over his supper at the end of the rosary did the strain show, and in the increasing risks he took. He spent little time at his police work. He had gone lucky so far but it was unlikely to continue so for ever.¹³²

Reegan, as explained above, is so eager to save money and to leave the police that he appears to forget about his family. When his second wife is in hospital in Dublin he tries to write her a letter, but soon notices that he is filling the pages merely with gossip as he regards writing to his wife just as a bothersome duty. When his wife answers that she is recovering well and that there is no point in visiting her, Reegan just takes her at her word and renounces traveling to Dublin to visit her. Apparently it is very comfortable for him to be absolved from his marital duties.¹³³ When his superior Superintendent Quirke starts to watch him more closely, Reegan becomes more careful and even less attentive towards his terminally ill wife than before.¹³⁴ When he expresses his anger at his Superintendent – again – Elizabeth, weakened by her disease, tries to comfort him, although she is the one who would be in great need to be reassured and be made comfortable. She advises him to “(...) care about the things you want, and ignore Quirke and those things.”¹³⁵ Although Reegan knows that his wife is right, he refuses to accept this and keeps on fighting. Elizabeth pulls herself together and comforts him. They end up having sex, a moment in which she possibly feels somewhat close to her husband who is so distracted by other things like bills and money.¹³⁶

However, it would be wrong and even unfair to suggest that Sergeant Reegan does not *care* about his wife. When he learns that Elizabeth wants to see the doctor he

¹³² McGahern, *The Barracks*, 127-128.

¹³³ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 127.

¹³⁴ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 140.

¹³⁵ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 180.

¹³⁶ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 181.

is worried about her, worried about losing another wife. Working so hard and thinking about how to defeat Superintendent Quirke even more than ever might be a way of escaping his worries about his wife, who he appears to love very much, despite his apparent inability to commit himself to his partner, something Elizabeth suffers from very much herself. However, Reegan *does* express his love for her from time to time, though in a very subtle, sometimes even clumsy or indirect way, as for instance when Elizabeth asks him to make an appointment with the doctor for her:

“Would you call at the doctor’s and ask him what would be a good time to see him tomorrow?” she asked quietly. (...)
“You don’t look well,” he said with unthinking cruelty. “You’ve not been yourself since Christmas.”
“I don’t think it’s anything,” she protested. “It’s only to make sure.”(...)
“I’ll tell him to come out,” he said.
“No, no. It’d cost too much.”
“Cost,” he derided angrily. “We’re not paupers.”¹³⁷

After Elizabeth has learned that she has to go to hospital for closer examination, she returns home. In a sudden fit of rage she screams at him when he returns as well, because he has not stayed at home to wait for her. Instinctively, Reegan walks closer to her and is truly right to do so. He remembers his first wife who often behaved like this, but was more easily to reassure. Such fits were usually followed by an embracement or sex, with which he could prove his maleness at the same time. Elizabeth, however, is different and Reegan has to admit to himself that he has never gotten close enough to her to be able to deal with her emotional life. In this very moment, however, he pays attention to her which is exactly what she desires in this sensitive moment.¹³⁸ Although the Sergeant does not explicitly show how worried he is, the reader gains some insight into his inner life when he is afraid that he could lose his second wife as well.¹³⁹ Towards the end of this novel, he suggests hiring a nurse to be with Elizabeth, who is puzzled at his suggestion. She asks him what the point of his plan is and he answers that “[t]here’s need for [her] to get better.”¹⁴⁰ Full of hope and happiness about his words, she asks him to keep in mind that a nurse would mean extra costs. Again he says that they are no paupers:

¹³⁷ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 45-46.

¹³⁸ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 99.

¹³⁹ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 46.

¹⁴⁰ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 197.

“We’re not paupers,” he answered. “The quicker you get the nurse the quicker you’ll be out and about again and the expense will be over quicker, not draggin’ on. With the nurse and the good weather comin’ you’ll be on your feet in no time.”¹⁴¹

Despite the fact that Elizabeth knows all these tricks from her own time as a nurse, she is glad about every sign of tenderness and concern for her that she can possibly receive in her loneliness and desperation.

On her spiritual journey, Elizabeth also experiences moments of suspicion and doubt such as after telling him that she has to go to hospital for closer examination: at dinner, she wonders what he is thinking and whether he has ever regretted having married her. As Reegan is a man who watches his money, Elizabeth would also like to know whether he is worried about the hospital bills he might have to pay.¹⁴² In the course of the book, Elizabeth continues reflecting on her marriage and makes a decision: while she is preparing her things for her stay at the hospital, she unlocks her wooden trunk in which she keeps various photographs, letters, certificates and other sentimental possessions and takes out the roll of money she has kept throughout the years. This roll of money would allow her to leave Ireland and her family at any time. Elizabeth has to confess to herself that she has probably not put much trust into this relationship either and now wonders whether she has contributed to its – potential – failure.¹⁴³

2.2.4. DR. MICHAEL HALLIDAY AS FATHER FIGURE IN “THE BARRACKS”

While Elizabeth is looking through the content of her wooden trunk, she remembers – as so often in this novel – her time as a nurse in London. The most essential experience she had there was her relationship with Dr. Michael Halliday, a doctor she dated when she was in London, working as a nurse at the same hospital as the doctor she went out with. Elizabeth still keeps his letters and books he gave her back then in her wooden trunk in the bedroom she shares with her

¹⁴¹ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 198.

¹⁴² Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 101.

¹⁴³ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 104.

husband.¹⁴⁴ In this relationship the female protagonist of “*The Barracks*” appears to have met the love of her life, a love with ups and downs one could possibly imagine – quite in contrast to her marriage with Reegan, who she seems to love but with who she has never experienced any depth. While she was going out with Michael Halliday, Elizabeth appears to have had the experience of feeling herself and of living her life to the full:

(...) he changed her whole life. She’d listened to him for so many hours in the long London evenings that were lovely now in the memory; read the books he gave her; went with him to films and plays and concerts; and most of all he made her suffer, he put her through the frightful mill of love.¹⁴⁵

Although, of course, Elizabeth and Dr. Michael Halliday were adults back then, she was the one to be dominated by him “and content to listen.”¹⁴⁶ Dr. Michael Halliday was in the more advantageous position; as a man, as an Englishman and as doctor he was above Elizabeth, the nurse from Ireland, a country of little esteem and economic wealth at that time.¹⁴⁷ Dr. Halliday, another father figure in this novel, taught Elizabeth to suffer, to see the dark side of life and to reflect on its meaning with his constant asking, especially when he was drunk: “What the hell is all this living and dying about anyway, Elizabeth? That’s what I’d like to know.”¹⁴⁸

As explained above, the female protagonist of “*The Barracks*” is an unusually strong-minded and independent woman for her time: one reason for her unusual independence might be that through Dr. Michael Halliday she learned to question universally acknowledged beliefs.¹⁴⁹ This may have been the reason for Elizabeth’s refusal to join the local branch of the Catholic Legion of Mary.¹⁵⁰ In the end, however, Dr. Halliday left Elizabeth, as “[he] couldn’t bear to impose his angst on Elizabeth [and feared] she could be contaminated by his darkness.”¹⁵¹ Another reason for her unusual will and independent thinking probably lies within herself: as an Irish nurse in London she was not expected to go out with an

¹⁴⁴ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 65.

¹⁴⁵ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 65.

¹⁴⁶ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 66.

¹⁴⁷ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 86.

¹⁴⁸ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 86.

¹⁴⁹ Cf., Maher, *Catholicism*, 145.

¹⁵⁰ Cf., Maher, *Catholicism*, 145.

¹⁵¹ Maher, *Catholicism*, 145.

English doctor, but still she dated him, not interested in what their colleagues were thinking or talking about her:

If she lived the life other people lived, looked on it the way they looked, she'd have no life of her own. She did not want an ensured imitation of other people's lives any more, she wanted her own, and with the wild greed of youth. (...) The impossible became turned by fierce desire into the possible, the whole world beginning again as it always has to do when a single human being discovers his or her uniqueness, everything becoming strange and vital and wondrous in this the only moment of real innocence, when after having slept for ever in the habits of other lives, suddenly, one morning, the first morning of the world, she had woken up to herself.¹⁵²

Reviewing this part of her life in London seems like an epiphanic vision, an insight into life she would probably not have gained without Dr. Michael Halliday.¹⁵³

The attitude she developed in London, also due to her relationship with Dr. Michael Halliday, remained with her as she proves when she marries Reegan, even though her family strongly opposed this marriage.

Elizabeth dies alone, while her husband Reegan and two of his children are on the bog digging turf. Although Sergeant Reegan knows that Elizabeth is in a terminal stage of her illness that could end her life at any time, Reegan is driven to earn money to be able to leave the police. Also John McGahern's father was not on his wife's deathbed in her last hours.¹⁵⁴

Reegan has already been pointed out to be the least violent of the father figures analyzed in this MA thesis. However, Reegan is described to be capable of a certain moodiness, because of the reasons explained on the first pages: as a former soldier of the War of Independence he fought for a country that does not live up to his ideals. Moreover, he is constantly involved into fights with his Superintendent Quirke and detests his job as a Sergeant of the Garda, the Irish police. Apparently, this seems to have been the norm for decades after the foundation of the Irish Free State. In an article on Catholicism and its influence on Irish society as depicted in John McGahern's novels, the famous Irish author is described to

¹⁵² McGahern, *The Barracks*, 87.

¹⁵³ Cf., Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 178.

¹⁵⁴ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 124-127.

share with other contemporary Irish writers a concern with the relationship between speech and action [and as such seeks ways] to explore the ways in which the dominant cultural discourses of Catholicism, patriarchy and nationalism achieve their effects on the minds and bodies of social subjects.¹⁵⁵

2.2.5. RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON IRISH FAMILY LIFE

John McGahern succeeds in providing his readers with a lively insight into the life of rural families in the Ireland of the forties and fifties. He also succeeds in showing how religion and the Catholic Church supported a patriarchal Irish society. His first novel “*The Barracks*” shows how Reegan – and probably most fathers of that time – relies on the Rosary to establish and confirm his position as the head of the family: in a daily ritual, Reegan, his wife, and his three children say the Rosary, always initiated by Reegan:

“Thou, O Lord, will open my lips”,
“And my tongue shall announce Thy praise,” they responded.
They droned into the Apostles’ Creed. Then Our Fathers and Hail Marys and Glory be to the Fathers were repeated over and over in their relentless monotony, without urge or passion, no call of love or answer, the voices simply murmuring away in a habit or death, their minds not on what they said, but blank or wandering or dreaming over their own lives.¹⁵⁶

The Rosary as an instrument of asserting male dominance within in the family will be discussed in more detail in connection with the analysis of the father figure in “*Amongst Women*”. In his “*Memoir*” the Irish novelist gives an impression of the importance and exploitation of the Rosary: religion was omnipresent in an Irish person’s life. The day began with a prayer and was closed with the saying of the Rosary. Everything that had to do with religion and the Roman Catholic Church, “hell and heaven and purgatory and limbo, were closer and far more real than America or Australia (...)”¹⁵⁷ and therefore could not be done without.

¹⁵⁵ Holland, *Re-Citing the Rosary*, 56-78.

¹⁵⁶ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 33.

¹⁵⁷ McGahern, *Memoir*, 10.

However, John McGahern admits that usually prayers were just words said automatically with no deeper feelings or meaning.¹⁵⁸

In “*The Barracks*”, Elizabeth is depicted as a deeply spiritually minded woman, a woman who has suffered heavily enough to appreciate the beauty around her and to accept her fate. In contrast to Elizabeth, her husband Sergeant Reegan does not appear to be interested in any “of the big questions. (...) He trusted all (...) to the priests as he trusted a sick body to the doctors.”¹⁵⁹ This Reegan seems to have in common with John McGahern’s father, whose “religion was of outward show, of pomp and power, edicts and structures, enforcements and observances and all the exactions they demanded.”¹⁶⁰ Religion and Catholicism, including all the rituals and holidays, appear to have been a means to establish patriarchy in Irish society. Violent tyrants at home seem to have been supported in their ambition to ensure their position as the heads of their families with every device possible, as can also be observed in “*The Dark*” and “*Amongst Women*”.

In connection with violent father figures in John McGahern’s novels “*The Barracks*”, “*The Dark*” and “*Amongst Women*”, it appears to be necessary to mention the Fourth Commandment: “Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.”¹⁶¹

Although the father figures discussed in this M.A.-thesis often scare their children to death, they still appear to be loved by them, who in turn are often forced into loving their fathers despite everything, as we can read in John McGahern’s last publication “*Memoir*”. Here, the deceased Irish writer remembers a very common conversation with his mother, for who God was the supreme authority to be severed in the world:

When she asked me, as she often did, ‘Who do you love most of all?’
I would answer readily and truthfully, ‘You, Mother,’ and despite her
pleasure, she would correct me.
‘You know that’s not right, though it makes me glad.’
I love God most of all.
‘And after God?’
‘Mary, my mother in heaven.’

¹⁵⁸ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 15.

¹⁵⁹ Maher, *Catholicism*, 89-90.

¹⁶⁰ McGahern, *Memoir*, 47.

¹⁶¹ <<http://www.phrasen.com>>, 5 June, 2008.

‘And after Mary?’
‘You, Mother.’
‘You know that’s not right either.’
‘I love my earthly father and mother equally.’¹⁶²

This appears to be true also in the case of the boy in “*The Dark*”, the second novel by John McGahern to be discussed in this M.A.-thesis: while the male protagonist of this literary work and his siblings have to live with their father’s moods and violent outbreaks, he still remembers that it is his duty to love his father – and sometimes he even manages to do so. After confession, the boy’s father is waiting outside the church:

You were in the state of grace, you remember you were supposed to love everyone, and your father was waiting for you outside at the gate. You had no right to hate him, he was there to be loved too.¹⁶³

However, it is hugely difficult to love such a father, especially when it is commanded¹⁶⁴ and regarded as a sin if this love cannot be developed – or enforced as fathers in John McGahern’s novels often seem to attempt whenever they feel unsure and exposed.

¹⁶² McGahern, *The Barracks*, 63.

¹⁶³ McGahern, John. *The Dark*, London: Faber and Faber, 43.

¹⁶⁴ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 44.

3. THE DARK

3.1. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVE

“*The Dark*”, told in shifting narrative points of view¹⁶⁵ and short episodic chapters¹⁶⁶, was John McGahern’s second novel. It was published in 1965 and banned immediately in Ireland by the Irish Censorship Board for alleged obscenities¹⁶⁷. As a consequence, and also because he had married in a Registry Office instead of a church, John McGahern was dismissed from his teaching post in Dublin, where he had taught in a clerically controlled school¹⁶⁸ for seven years¹⁶⁹. As the Catholic Church was in control of almost everything and consequently also of Irish education at that time, it accepted neither a novel like “*The Dark*” nor a marriage entered into in a Registry Office without a following ceremony at church: “While the state paid teachers, it was the Church who hired and fired.”¹⁷⁰

As Jürgen Kamm argues, “*The Dark*” seems to be a logical consequence of “*The Barracks*”: while Reegan’s children are only vaguely described and the childless step-mother is the focus of the story, in “*The Dark*” we encounter a boy growing up and being involved in a heavy father-son conflict, another autobiographically motivated motif in John McGahern’s work.¹⁷¹ Especially in “*The Dark*” John McGahern does not seem to have been afraid of presenting his readership with sexual harassment and abuse of girls and women experienced by Irish men: as we later learn the protagonist’s sister Joan is sexually harassed by her employer, which “runs parallel to the protagonist’s own escape from the latent-homosexual clutches of his uncle, Father Gerald, after which he makes a definite decision not to join the priesthood.”¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ Cf., Cahalan, *Female and Male Perspectives*, 105-135.

¹⁶⁶ Cf., Cahalan, *Female and Male Perspectives*, 121.

¹⁶⁷ Cf., González, *Ireland in Writing*, 39-50.

¹⁶⁸ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 217.

¹⁶⁹ Cf., González, *Ireland in Writing*, 39.

¹⁷⁰ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 139-154.

¹⁷¹ Cf., Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 180.

¹⁷² Cahalan, *Female and Male Perspectives*, 124.

In “*The Dark*” we experience a shifting point of narration: first, second and third person singular are applied to depict the boy’s struggle for freedom. Jürgen Kamm considers it to be reasonable to assume that the Irish novelist “simply could not bring himself to write in the first person singular (...) because the novel is fraught with autobiographical experiences.”¹⁷³ Reading “*Memoir*” clearly shows the autobiographical elements in John McGahern’s novels.

John McGahern’s father, to who the author had a distanced relationship, was rather angry with his eldest son as he was of the opinion that he “wasn’t standing up for [himself] enough”.¹⁷⁴ After his dismissal from his teaching post, the Irish writer had a year’s leave of absence from school¹⁷⁵ and went abroad to live in England, Spain and the United States of America. Later he returned to his native country to live in County Leitrim.¹⁷⁶ Despite the shameful treatment he had to experience, the famous Irish novelist felt “nothing but gratitude to the Catholic Church”¹⁷⁷ throughout his whole life, as it was through this religious institution “that he came into contact with words and imagery, the sacraments, sin and grace.”¹⁷⁸ In general, the Irish Republic used to be shaped by “the churches [which] were the bibles of the poor”.¹⁷⁹ As John McGahern once explained in one of his interviews, the Irish Church received great amounts of money as it was a useful tool of social order and discipline exercised on the Irish population.¹⁸⁰ While his affection for the Irish Catholic Church remained unharmed throughout his life, John McGahern described the experience of being banned by the Irish Censorship Board as a rather unpleasant one, as he thought that his second novel the “*The Dark*” was not worth all the trouble. Although famous colleagues like Samuel Beckett were planning to protest on John McGahern’s behalf, he found himself unable to take the ban seriously. Moreover, the Irish novelist felt rather embarrassed as “[he] belonged to the first generation to be born into the Free State, and [he] thought it was [their] country and [they] were making fools out of

¹⁷³ Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 182.

¹⁷⁴ Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 137-157.

¹⁷⁵ Cf., Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 145.

¹⁷⁶ Cf., González, *Ireland in Writing*, 39-50.

¹⁷⁷ Maher, *Catholicism*, 85-99.

¹⁷⁸ Maher, *Catholicism*, 86.

¹⁷⁹ Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 137-157.

¹⁸⁰ Cf., Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 140.

[themselves].”¹⁸¹ In an interview, which offers a deep and interesting insight into John McGahern’s works and mind, we learn that “the ideal republic existed always more in the world of letters than in that of fact; and to a great degree, that is still true today.”¹⁸² Apparently, the Republic of Ireland had to go a long and stony way to become what it is now. Possibly the Irish Republic is still working on freeing itself from old values and dependencies, as recurring themes in Irish literature appear to prove.

In his works, and especially in his second novel “*The Dark*”, the Irish artist John McGahern is primarily concerned “with the relationship between speech and action.”¹⁸³ What he utilizes in this literary work is performative language, a kind of language distancing itself from the mere description of deeds. What McGahern was seeking to achieve in his novels, and also in those discussed in this M.A.-thesis, was to explore the connection between speech and action, especially when it comes to relating male language to physical and verbal violence as shown in the “*The Dark*”.¹⁸⁴

The scandalous novel is argued to be a continuation of Reegan’s life as a single-father: Mahoney, the protagonist’s father, is a widower and raises his children on his own, applying physical violence as a means of asserting his authority and raising the children.¹⁸⁵ It was the very first page of “*The Dark*” that caused a massive outrage in the Republic of Ireland:

“Say what you said because I know.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Out with it I tell you.”

“I don’t know I said anything.”

“F-U-C-K is what you said, isn’t it? That profane and ugly word. Now do you think you can bluff your way out of it?”

“I didn’t mean, it just came out.”

“The filth that’s in your head came out, you mean. And I’m going to teach you a lesson for once. You’d think there’d be some respect for your dead mother left in the house. And trying to sing dumb – as if butter wouldn’t melt. But I’ll teach you.”

He took the heavy leather strap he used for sharpening his razor from its nail on the side of the press.

¹⁸¹ Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 145.

¹⁸² Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 7.

¹⁸³ Holland, *Re-Citing the Rosary*, 56.

¹⁸⁴ Cf., Holland, *Re-citing the Rosary*, 57.

¹⁸⁵ Cf., Kennedy, *The Novels*, 119.

(...)

“Into the girls’ room. This’ll have to be witnessed. I’ll teach a lesson this house won’t forget.”¹⁸⁶

Reading this passage, one might get the impression that Old Mahoney gains sexual satisfaction from torturing his only son. John McGahern, having made the same experience with his own father, writes in his last work “*Memoir*”:

(...) Then late one evening he hit me hard without warning. There did not have to be a reason. (...) the blows could come out of a moment of irritation or misunderstanding. (...), I suspect there was something sexual in his violence, because the blows could flare up on nothing, and afterwards it was hard to trace them to a cause.¹⁸⁷

Reading “*Memoir*” raises an awareness of how different John McGahern’s mother Susan must have been: not only does she appear as most sensitive woman, but also as a teacher quite unusual for her time. There is no hint at Susan having ever bet one of her children. Not even her pupils did she punish physically as the following passage from “*Memoir*” proves:

My mother was unusual in that she disliked using any form of physical punishment when it was routine and widespread and savage beatings were a commonplace in schools, but she had troubles with the inspectors over the lack of strict discipline in her classes.¹⁸⁸

Physical punishment of pupils was common and usually not questioned at this time in Ireland – quite on the contrary: “Authority’s writ ran from God the Father down and could not be questioned.”¹⁸⁹

In John McGahern’s second novel “*The Dark*”, told in short, episodic chapters¹⁹⁰, the reader encounters probably the most violent and gruesome of all father figures in the Irish novelist’s work as can be inferred from the passage cited above. This novel, often “praised as the most accomplished presentation of an Irish adolescence since Joyce’s “*A Portrait*”¹⁹¹, tells about the struggles of the young protagonist, whose name is never disclosed in the novel, to escape his tyrannical father, the embittered widower Old Mahoney¹⁹², to live a life of his own. Set in the rural west of the Republic of Ireland, the boy, as the male protagonist of this

¹⁸⁶ McGahern, *The Dark*, 7.

¹⁸⁷ McGahern, *Memoir*, 190.

¹⁸⁸ McGahern, *Memoir*, 8.

¹⁸⁹ McGahern, *Memoir*, 18.

¹⁹⁰ Cf., Cahalan, *Female and Male Perspectives*, 105-135.

¹⁹¹ Cf., Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 175-193.

¹⁹² Cf., Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 180.

*bildungsroman*¹⁹³ is called, lives with his siblings in constant fear of their gruesome father, a small farmer.¹⁹⁴ In “*The Dark*”, the male adolescent protagonist is confronted with two major conflicts in his young life: on the one hand he and his siblings are at constant war with their abusive, brutal father, on the other hand he is torn between his dead mother’s wish for him to become a priest and his awakening sexuality and growing interest in the female sex. As a result of this, the boy would like to fulfill the deep wish of his mother, who he loved very much and who he also misses terribly¹⁹⁵, while he also desires to experience love and sex with a woman, and therefore indulges in orgies of masturbation¹⁹⁶. This is of course regarded as a most horrible sin by the Roman Catholic Church and consequently also by Irish society. Becoming a priest, however, used to be the most desirable job in Ireland of all. As the Catholic religion and the Roman Catholic Church dominated the society of Ireland for a long time, “[having a] priest in the family was like having money in the bank of this world and the next.”¹⁹⁷ In the course of the story of this *bildungsroman*, the boy tries to test his possibilities in life and attempts to find a way to escape his moody father and the hard work on his farm.¹⁹⁸ The feelings of guilt weigh heavily on the boy’s conscience, and when he indulges into sweet memories of his tender mother, he becomes aware of life being determined by final death.. This reminds the readership of Elizabeth’s thoughts and reflections on life and death:

The moment of the death was the one real moment in life; everything took its proper position there, and was fixed for ever, whether to live in joy or hell for all eternity, or had your life been the haphazard flicker between nothingness and nothingness.¹⁹⁹

However, we can also recognize Sergeant Reegan’s thoughts in this passage, thoughts of the pointlessness of life after his second wife’s death:

¹⁹³ A “*Bildungsroman*” is – according to Jeffrey Sammons - “the process (the *Bildung*) – not the protagonist’s success or failure – that matters (..)”. See: Kennedy, Eileen. “The Novels of John McGahern: The Road Away Becomes the Road Back.” *Contemporary Irish Writing*. Ed.: James D. Brophy and Raymond J. Porter. Boston: Iona College Press, 1983, 106 ff. Moreover, it is defined to be “a novel describing its protagonist’s coming of age . [It] (...) examines a character’s early, formative life experiences than any other type of fiction.” See: Cahalan, James M. “Female and Male Perspectives on Growing Up Irish.” *Double Visions. Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999, 105 ff.

¹⁹⁴ Cf., Kennedy, *The Novels*, 119.

¹⁹⁵ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 10.

¹⁹⁶ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 213-237.

¹⁹⁷ Maher, *Catholicism*, 85-99.

¹⁹⁸ Cf., Kennedy, *The Novels*, 115-127.

¹⁹⁹ McGahern, *The Dark*, 69.

There's nothing to lose! Nothing to lose! You just go out like a light in the end. And what you've done or didn't do doesn't matter a curse then, wore itself into Reegan's bones in the next months. (...)

"No, no, no," the whisper grew more savage as the autumn wore to winter and the end of another year of his life. "No, no, no! There's nothing to lose! Nothing to lose! You just go out like a light. And what you did or didn't do then doesn't matter a curse, so do what you want, what you want to do, while you've still the time."²⁰⁰

Also John McGahern's mother Susan, a deeply religious woman, wanted her first son to become a priest, a great wish the popular Irish writer would have loved to fulfill. Again and again his mother must have brought up the topic, also when she was already suffering from breast cancer as a passage in John McGahern's *'Memoir'* may prove:

'Do you think when you grow up that you could change your mind about becoming a priest?' (...)

'No, I'll not change.'

'What makes you so certain?'

I disliked the direction the conversation was taking, and shivered at the very thought of death and the possibility of eternal damnation that awaited us all. (...)

'It's too hard to get to heaven if you are not a priest,' I said. (...)

I became unusually silent. 'If you're a priest it's a great deal easier to get to heaven,' I said finally.

(...)

[I]t was to grow clearer in the years ahead when it became intricately linked with its opposite, a dream of love and sex and worldly happiness. To enter the priesthood was to die in life, and by giving back our life into the hands and service of God we were circumventing death and the judgment while still in life.²⁰¹

Also in this passage from *"Memoir"* we can detect McGahern's deep love for his mother which comes as no surprise considering his father and his moody character. Moreover, the Irish novelist spent most of his childhood with her. At first John McGahern, the oldest of seven children²⁰², lived with his mother Susan, a national schoolteacher teaching all over the country, then with his father Francis, a police sergeant, after his mother had died from cancer.²⁰³ His mother's death and the experience of living with a violent father in addition with an upbringing in a strictly Catholic society shaped his life and work throughout.²⁰⁴ As he had a

²⁰⁰ McGahern, *The Barracks*, 226.

²⁰¹ McGahern, *Memoir*, 100.

²⁰² Cf., Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 140.

²⁰³ Cf., González, *Ireland in Writing*, 39-50.

²⁰⁴ Crown, Sarah. "Novelist John McGahern dies at 71". *Guardian Unlimited Books*, March 30, 2006. <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,,1743320,00.html>>

very close relationship with his mother, he was traumatized by her premature death of breast cancer when he was a boy.... One more reason why his mother's death was such a tragedy to him was that his father "[...] was a sadistic bully [who] beat [John and his siblings] unmercifully"²⁰⁵ – just like Old Mahoney who takes out his aggression on his defenseless children.

Even after his beloved mother's death he tried to keep alive her fondest wish of her first son becoming a priest, also in order to say Mass for her one day, as we learn in his last publication "*Memoir*":

Time had healed that first pain of loss. My sense of her had been weakened by all the new experiences crowding in with each new day, but the promise still remained that one day I would say Mass for her.²⁰⁶

3.2. THE FATHER FIGURE IN "THE DARK"

3.2.1. MAHONEY AS FATHER FIGURE IN "THE DARK"

Also in this novel by John McGahern we are able to identify more than only one father figure. To begin with, there is – of course – the protagonist's father, apparently very similar to the novelist's father Sergeant Francis McGahern. As mentioned above, Old Mahoney is a bitter widower and farmer, raising his children on his own. While his son and his daughters are living in constant fear of their unpredictable father and his brutal outbreaks and beatings, he regards himself as a poor victim doing all he is able to do to offer his unthankful children the best life possible, which is of course not true. Although the children are – as a matter of fact – defenseless and at their father's mercy, they still know how to pay back what he is constantly doing to them:

(...) they learned how to make him suffer - to close their life against him and to leave him to himself.
"I'm told nothing in this house, never. I might as well be a leper but who's bringing you up alone without help, who's earning the bread," he'd complain.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Unknown author, "John McGahern", *Times Online*, April 1, 2006. <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/news/articles/0,,1743320,00html>>

²⁰⁶ McGahern, *Memoir*, 204.

²⁰⁷ McGahern, *The Dark*. 11.

In a later passage, however, the male protagonist of the banned novel *“The Dark”* is brave enough to stand up against his own father to protect his sister Joan, who even got beaten for having her first menstruation.²⁰⁸

In another passage, Old Mahoney, apparently looking for a “justification” to beat one of his children, hears the word “always” in one of their conversations, a word that just turns him into a complete madman:

”Did I hear you mention ALWAYS?” he attacked in a savage voice and the girls turned afraid.

“Did you know that there’s only one thing you should use ALWAYS about and that’s God. He always was and always will be, for ever and ever, Amen,” he shouted (...). “What were you talking about?”

“We were just saying it’d be always like this,” and they looked so afraid that it roused his suspicion. (...)

“We said it’d be always like this in this house.”

“This house,” he repeated. “This house. It’ll be always like this. So you’re not satisfied, it’s not grand enough for you, is it not? (...)”²⁰⁹

When Old Mahoney starts beating his daughter Joan heavily, the boy is unable to watch any of these violent scenes anymore and therefore tells his father to stop. Surprised at this unusual behavior, he lets go off his daughter for a moment. Ready to beat his own father if necessary, the boy is no longer scared of Old Mahoney, who senses that this time he will not have any chance against his own son:

Mahoney fell back without striking, as if he sensed, mixture of incomprehension and fear on the face. The world was a shattered place:

“I reared a son that’d lift a hand to his father. A son that’d lift a hand to his father.”²¹⁰

Also in this passage we can find parallels to the experiences John McGahern once had with his own father. A similar scene is described in his *‘Memoir’*: here we find a John McGahern who is no longer afraid of his father, and a father whose world also seems shattered:

(..) I found him beating one of the girls and shouted at him to leave her alone. (...), he turned and struck me violently (...), but I hardly felt the blow.

²⁰⁸ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 34.

²⁰⁹ McGahern, *The Dark*, 35 ff

²¹⁰ McGahern, *The Dark*, 36.

I felt there was no end to what I could do if he moved. I would tear him apart (...). He fell back, crying. 'I reared a son. I reared a son that would lift a hand to his father. I reared a son.'²¹¹

Despite his fierce outbreaks of violence, Old Mahoney can still be charming and knows how to seduce his children into trusting him over and over again. Although the children know their father all too well, they still attempt to trust him again and again, because they want to. In the end, he will always be their father.²¹² Also here we find obvious similarities to John McGahern's father, who felt he was the victim throughout his life, especially after Susan, his first wife and John McGahern's beloved mother, had died of breast cancer:

O God, O God, O God, what did I do to deserve such a pack? (...) I'll pack you all off to the orphanage where the nuns and brothers won't be long in bringing you to your senses. *They'll* soon put manners on you. Of course this old food gets no thanks when another man would lock the doors and drive you out on the side of the road to eat grass.²¹³

Like the children in "*The Dark*", also McGahern and his siblings developed a very close relationship in order to be better able to stand up against their father and to defend each other from his gruesome beatings.²¹⁴ Sergeant Francis McGahern was also very well able to be a charming man, for instance when he tried to make his eldest son John come to live with him, an aim he could not reach, however.²¹⁵

The boy, the protagonist of "*The Dark*", appears to share another experience with the Irish novelist John McGahern as well. He, like once the famous Irish writer, experiences repeated sexual abuse by his father with who he has to share a bed. In chapter three of this critically acclaimed novel, the horrible scenario is depicted as John McGahern describes it in his last book "*Memoir*"²¹⁶: when Old Mahoney enters the bedroom, he checks if his son, who tries to feign sleep in order to escape his father's disgusting sexual advances, is still awake with a burning match he holds close to the boy's face. When he lies down next to the boy, he draws him closer, massages his belly and thighs and masturbates with his son in his arms. John McGahern describes a very similar situation in his "*Memoir*":

²¹¹ McGahern, *Memoir*, 191.

²¹² Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 11 ff.

²¹³ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 156.

²¹⁴ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 159.

²¹⁵ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 107.

²¹⁶ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 188.

Since my mother's death I slept with my father in the big iron bed (...). When my father came late to bed and enquired as he took off his clothes if I was awake, I nearly always feigned sleep. He never interfered with me in an obvious sexual way, but he frequently massaged my belly and thighs. As in all other things connected with the family, he asserted he was doing this for my good: it relaxed taut muscles, eased wind and helped bring on sleep. In these years, (...), I took him at his word; but as soon as it was safe to do so, I turned away on some pretext or other, (...). Looking back, (...), I suspect he was masturbating. During the beatings there was sometimes the same sexual undertow, but louder, coarser.²¹⁷

In order to justify his unbelievable, humiliating deed towards his only son, Mahoney talks to his son of love between family members and so pushes away all his responsibility and guilt towards his child:

"In every house there are differences. Things don't all the time run smooth. Though that's not what counts, sure it's not." (...)

"As long as we know that. That's all that matters. Even though things don't run right. As long as people know that, what happens doesn't matter as long as the feeling between them is right. Then things can't run wrong for long, isn't that right?"

"That's right."

"Even Up Above there was trouble. There's differences everywhere. But that's not what matters. Everyone loses their temper and says things and does things but as long as you know there's love there it doesn't matter. Don't you know I love you no matter what happens?"

"I do."

"And you love your father?"

"I do."²¹⁸

It probably goes without saying that the boy must feel nothing but hatred for his father and sometimes also embarrassment at Mahoney's behavior as for instance in a noble restaurant: after winning a scholarship, Old Mahoney invites his son to a rather noble restaurant, in which he "[tries] to cover his unease by aggressiveness"²¹⁹, as he probably does not know how to behave in such an extraordinary situation. However, from time to time "the boy's hatred of his father gives way to affection, even love, (...)."²²⁰ This, we learn in the last chapter of "*The Dark* after the protagonist has decided to leave university in favor of a secure job at the ESB. When father and son again share a bed in guest-house in Galway, the situation evokes memories of the horrible nights in which the boy experienced

²¹⁷ McGahern, *Memoir*, 187-188.

²¹⁸ McGahern, *The Dark*, 18 ff.

²¹⁹ McGahern, *The Dark*, 156.

²²⁰ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 218.

Mahoney's sexual advances. However, this time any sign of sexual abuse is absent²²¹:

The difference between past and present marks the development the protagonist has undergone. Hatred and disgust have given way to affection, even love: 'I wouldn't have been brought up any other way or by any other father.' [the boy is able to say to his father in the end.]²²²

3.2.2. THE UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR AS FATHER FIGURE IN "THE DARK"

As mentioned above, not only Old Mahoney is an example for the figure of the father in John McGahern's works, but also other male characters in "*The Dark*" are. The boy would love to fulfill his beloved mother's wish to become a priest. However, the male protagonist of this novel finds himself unable to do so as his desire for sexual relations with women is too strong, even though he has a scholarship for the Brother's College at which he could study to become an ordained priest.²²³ His next choice then is to attend university after winning a scholarship to University College, Galway after a time of hard work for his finals, the only time in which he is left alone by his abusive father. Because the study fees for medicine are too high and because six years of studying at university appear too long for him, the boy decides to start science as it does not take so much time to complete and also does not cost such a great amount of money. The boy knows that losing his scholarship would mean to rely on his violent father financially again.²²⁴ He starts imagining a student's life at university before he has any idea what to study or what to do with his life in general.²²⁵ When he thinks about going to England to find work, his father is very much against it:

Anyone can go to England. You don't have to waste years at school to go to England. If you've a fiver in your pocket and the boat fare you can go to England, that's all that's wanting. And I don't want any dirty money from England.²²⁶

²²¹ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 189-191.

²²² Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 218.

²²³ Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 180.

²²⁴ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 174.

²²⁵ Cf., Cahalan, *Female and Male Perspectives*, 105 – 135.

²²⁶ McGahern, *The Dark*, 115.

When the protagonist of “*The Dark*” commences his studies, he is soon very disappointed and disillusioned: as a start he is simply too shy and withdrawn to join social life at university and in town, where his university colleagues celebrate life. Moreover, he is confronted with great difficulties right in his very first lecture: the Physics Theater is full of students who are waiting for the lecturer to start. Making a lot of noise, they start stamping their feet until the professor enters the lecture room and informs them that he is unwilling to tolerate hooliganism in his lecture. Unfortunately, the boy starts smiling right in this moment, which the professor regards as making fun of him. Consequently, the lecturer throws him out of the lecture room, humiliating him endlessly and out of a simple misunderstanding:

“The pompous little fucker and *hooliganism* filling his mouth,” but why had this cursed shame and misfortune to fall on you before any of the others. On the wet tarmacadam you went at snail’s pace towards the archway, trying to go over what had happened, and the crippling flush of shame when you did, over and over as you went on towards the archway.²²⁷

Even when an older fellow student informs him that Professor Brady, who threw the boy out of his lecture room, always behaves like this at the beginning of every university year, the boy feels too guilty and ashamed to forget about this incident. Although the older colleague tells the protagonist that everything will be alright again if he just approaches Professor Brady and apologizes, he cannot bring himself to do so. Rather he interprets this unpleasant event as a sign for his being unqualified for university life anyway. He chooses the easiest way and sends his father Old Mahoney a telegram:

WANT TO TAKE E.S.B. AND LEAVE UNI.; WILL WAIT FOR
YOUR CONSENT²²⁸

In this case the boy has probably surrendered to two father figures: firstly, he did not even try to apologize to Professor Brady who would have “forgiven” him. Secondly, he informs his real father that he does not have any intention to finish his university studies. However, he still feels he needs his father’s consent to be brave enough to quit his studies at the University College, Galway – and probably also to feel a little less like a failure.

²²⁷ McGahern, *The Dark*, 180.

²²⁸ McGahern, *The Dark*, 182.

Instead of fighting the boy gives up his scholarship and his university studies to accept a boring, but secure job at the E.S.B. (Electricity Supply Board) in Dublin²²⁹. Having been exposed to violence and feelings of guilt throughout his childhood and youth due to his father, the boy possibly does not have any other choice than to give in instead of freeing himself from the domination he has experienced throughout his life due to his father. The protagonist of “*The Dark*” tries to justify his crucial decision and reminds himself of the advantages of quitting university to work for a regular check that would set him free from financial dependence on his tyrannical father. He attempts to convince himself of university meaning studying useless things for equally useless examinations.²³⁰ Moreover, leaving university seems to have been foreshadowed in an earlier part of the novel, in which there might be already found some signs for the boy’s tendency to be better able to work manually than mentally. Being outside in the nature might offer him the opportunity to find the inner peace he has been searching for all the time²³¹:

Never was so much work done, fences fixed and egg bushes rooted up, usually left to the winter to do. (...) He was a man. He was among men. He was able to take a man’s place.

What was strange to notice was that Mahoney was growing old. (...) The cattle got ringworm. They were driven into the cobbled yard, and the wooden gate reinforced with iron bars. (...) For the first time he was their match, he was no longer afraid of a crushing, he had strength enough. (...)

Mahoney was far the more cautious, a long remove from the days he used shout and bluster on these same cobbles, while the son stood terrified of the charging cattle with the box of green paint and the brush in his hand. (...)

“Watch now. Better men than you got hurt. (...) Maybe we better leave him, and take a chance he’ll get alright without the paint, he’s too strong,” [Mahoney] counseled now.

“No. I think we’ll get him. You can put the paint down, and push him into the wall once I catch him. I’ll be able to hold him once we get him against the wall.” (...)

The animal was caught and held. Mahoney daubed in the paint. The gate was opened. They all pushed out with the green paint on the sores.

(...)

²²⁹ <http://www.esb.ie/main/home/index.jsp>, 20 May, 2008

²³⁰ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 179.

²³¹ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 220.

[Mahoney] was growing old. Hard to imagine this was the same man who'd made the winters a nightmare over the squalid boots, the beatings and the continual complaining.²³²

From this we can safely infer that the male protagonist of "*The Dark*" has emancipated himself to a certain degree, has grown in physical as well as in psychological strength and would now be able to take his father's place. He seems to be more able to view his father from a certain distance – and to even pity him at times. Furthermore, the boy appears to be more aware of his own self, of his growing manhood and of his father growing old. Surprisingly, the boy even manages to forgive his father, who asks for mutual forgiveness²³³, at the end of the novel: after quitting university in favor of a job at the E.S.B., his father Old Mahoney picks him up, also to discuss his son's decision with the Dean of University College, Galway.²³⁴ The conversation with the Dean, who might serve as another father figure as he is in a position of authority, is short, as he "was forcing [the boy] to decide for [himself]"²³⁵ The boy, having suffered from terrorizing authority throughout his life and therefore being unable to deal with it adequately, decides in favor of the E.S.B., however, not without being angry with the Dean:

(...) What right had anybody or anything to defeat you and what right had you to feel defeated, who was to define its name?
One day, one day, you'd come perhaps more to real authority than all this, an authority that had need of neither vast buildings nor professorial chairs nor robes nor solemn organ tones, an authority that was simply a state of mind, a calmness even in the face of the turmoil of your own passing. (...) ²³⁶

Rüdiger Imhof argues that the boy is not only scared of failing at examinations, but is also incapable of "weigh[ing] the pros and cons of the two options [and] Mahoney is no help."²³⁷ Moreover, it could be argued that the protagonist of this novel might find it easier to give up before he has even started university. Financial safety as well as financial independence from the tyrant Mahoney – despite the scholarship – appears to be a sensible argument to quit university as

²³² McGahern, *The Dark*, 149-150.

²³³ Cf., Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 120.

²³⁴ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 186-188.

²³⁵ McGahern, *The Dark*, 187.

²³⁶ McGahern, *The Dark*, 188.

²³⁷ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 220.

well as a comfortable way of sparing oneself hard work and the terrible experience of failing some exams.

Before returning home, the boy and his old father spend a night in a guesthouse in Galway. As mentioned before they share a bed again. Indeed, this situation evokes memories of Chapter Three, in which the agony of having to share a bed with Old Mahoney is explicitly described. Memories of the nightmare nights in the bed with the broken brass bell came, and it was strange how the years had passed, how the nights were once, and different now, how this night'd probably be the last night of lying together.²³⁸

This time, however, the situation is quite different from what it used to be like for the boy when he had to share a bed with his father back home. In a conversation father and son discuss the boy's new post at the E.S.B. in Dublin.. Old Mahoney briefly indulges into memories of their life together before his son finished school:

“We won't be together any more. There was good times and bad between us, as near everywhere, but it's not what counts much.”

“No. It's not what counts.”

(...)

“Things happened in all that time, none of us are saints. Tempers were lost. You don't hold any of that against me, I don't hold anything against you.”

“No, I wouldn't have been brought up any other way or by any other father.”²³⁹

Reading this passage in the last chapter of “*The Dark*” one clearly notices that the protagonist has matured, despite everything his father has ever done to him. Now, the boy does not appear to feel anger or even hatred for his ageing father – quite on the contrary: in the end he is not only capable of forgiving his father, but even of loving him.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ McGahern, *The Dark*, 189.

²³⁹ McGahern, *The Dark*, 190-191.

²⁴⁰ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 218.

3.2.3. THE PRIEST AS FATHER FIGURE IN “THE DARK”

As mentioned in various passages of this M.A.-Thesis, also in this novel one is able to identify priests metaphorically as father figures. Throughout “*The Dark*” the reader encounters priests, who shape the boy’s life permanently just as the Roman Catholic Church determined the life of not only all of John McGahern’s fictional characters, but also of Irish society in general for a very long time:

[The] symbolic domination [of the Catholic Church in Ireland] was manifested in the legislation, the censorship of publications and films, the control of the media, the public display of Catholic icons and symbols, clerical dress, and so forth. It was also manifested in the way people understood and presented themselves in everyday life. It became ingrained in their sense of self, in what is thinkable and unthinkable, imaginable and unimaginable in their sense of piety, humility, and self-denial. The Church’s symbolic domination of Irish social life gave rise to a Catholic sense of self.²⁴¹

This might serve as an explanation for violent fathers in Irish homes, literature and especially in the context of this M.A.-Thesis John McGahern’s works:

The father is all-powerful within the home. This power is bestowed on him to a certain extent by a Catholic Church that endorses natural discipline. The Ireland of the 1950s was a patriarchal society. Priests (all male naturally) inculcated respect for their parents in children. (...), the father was the authority figure and administered the corporal punishment.²⁴²

As another consequence of this, the boy appears to have felt guilty throughout his life. Unable to fulfill his dead mother’s wish to become a priest and to say Mass for her one day²⁴³, he also has to fight his growing sexual desires and his urge to relieve himself from the force of suppressing his awakening sexuality. The boy masturbates over advertisements in the *Irish Independent*, described vividly and in detail in Chapter Five of John McGahern’s second novel, and told in the first person to intensify the protagonist’s fantasies as well as his inner conflict of living up to the Church’s commandments on the one hand and of relieving himself from the heavy burden of being a human and a good Catholic on the other hand:

²⁴¹Inglis, Tom. “Catholic Church, Religious Capital and Symbolic Domination.” *Engaging Modernity. Reading of Irish Politics, Culture and Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Ed. Michael Böss and Eamon Maher. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2003. 43-71.

²⁴² Maher, *Catholicism*, 85-99.

²⁴³ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 33.

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 stretch above her head to bare the growths of hair in both armpits.

REMOVE SUPERFLUOUS HAIR

(...) Touch the black hair with the lips, salt of sweat same as my own, let them rove along the rises of the breast. Press the mouth on the black bursting lips, slip the tongue through her teeth. (...) She stirs to life, I have her excited, she too is crazy, get hands under her. (...) I try to pump madly on the mattress, fighting to get up her nightdress, to get into her, before too late, swoon of death into the softness of her flesh. (...) The pulsing dies away, (...). The day of the room returns, red shelves with the paper and the black wooden crucifix, (...). Everything is dead as dirt, it is as easy to turn over. I'd committed five sins since morning.²⁴⁴

The boy even counts each act of masturbation to confess everything at confession.²⁴⁵ Feelings of guilt appear to accompany an Irish person throughout their life. This becomes obvious in a scene in which John McGahern describes – in the second person narration – what confession means for the protagonist of the *'The Dark'*, and probably also for other Irish people, especially in former times when the Roman Catholic Church dominated practically every aspect of Irish life:

In fear and shame you are moving to the death of having to describe the real face of your life to your God in his priest, and to beg forgiveness, and promise, for there is still time. (...) You were sick and wanted to leave but you couldn't. You tried to grasp in the memory your sins once more: lies four times, anger three, prayers not said five or six or eight times it hardly mattered. Sins of lust after women every day in your mind for the last three months, orgies of self-abuse, the mind flinched from admitting the exact number of times, two hundred times or more. You were steadily moving in the flow of the queue towards a confession of guilt, and the moment of confessing would be a kind of death.²⁴⁶

Even more embarrassing is the fact that the priest asks if the boy causes seed to come when he masturbates and that he tells him to fight that sin.²⁴⁷ Still, however,

²⁴⁴ McGahern, *The Dark*, 30 ff.

²⁴⁵ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 31.

²⁴⁶ McGahern, *The Dark*, 40.

²⁴⁷ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 41-42.

it is a great relief when he is absolved from the heavy burden of sin at confession and to be told to pray for grace in order to save his soul:

“You must fight that sin, it’ll grip you like a habit if you don’t, if you don’t break it now you may never be able to break it. You must come often to confession. Never let yourself stay away more than a month. Come every week if you can. You must pray for grace. You must make up your mind to break that sin once and for all now, tonight. Confession is worthless if you’re not firmly decided on that.”

“I promise, father.”

Such relief had come to you, fear and darkness gone, never would you sin again. The pleasures seemed so mean and grimy against the sheer delight of peace, pure as snow in the air.

“For your penance say a rosary before the Blessed Sacrament.”

The hand was raised in absolution, (...).

“God bless you. Say a prayer for me, my child,” and the world was woken by the banging across the wooden shutter, just wire and wood before you now, the smell of cloves.²⁴⁸

A very prominent priest in “*The Dark*” is Father Gerald, a cousin of the boy’s father²⁴⁹, who comes to pay the Mahoneys a visit every year. The boy’s father Old Mahoney dislikes these visits, but because he fears a priest’s power too much he always establishes the appearance of welcoming Father Gerald at his home.

Father Gerald has a serious conversation with the boy and his father about the protagonist’s future, as he has now almost finished school. Under consideration is – of course – that the teenage boy could enter priesthood and ‘[would] go free in God’s name’²⁵⁰, a rather weak motivation for such a great decision, but still convincing for Irish people some time ago. As already mentioned in this M.A.-thesis, “[having a] priest in the family was like having money in the bank of this world and the next.”²⁵¹ Entering priesthood was a serious option for any young Irish man:

There was an unthinking, non-intellectual attachment to religion: it provided some relief from the drudgery of life. A commonly held view at the time was that hardship in this life would be rewarded with eternal happiness in the next. The priesthood was a serious option for any boy who happened to be clever or middle class, or ideally both.²⁵²

²⁴⁸ McGahern, *The Dark*, 42.

²⁴⁹ Cf., Maher, *Catholicism*, 91.

²⁵⁰ McGahern, *The Dark*, 25.

²⁵¹ Maher, *Catholicism*, 85-99.

²⁵² Maher, *Catholicism*, 85.

Also John McGahern once told his mother that entering priesthood would facilitate going to heaven after death.²⁵³ In the Ireland of that time also teachers were highly regarded and their profession of seen as a second priesthood.²⁵⁴

John McGahern, a master of conveying Irish rural life to his readership²⁵⁵, does not fail to describe how the rural society of Ireland was (and in some cases probably still is) attached to their rituals in “*The Dark*” as well. Consequently, the priest Father Gerald, another potential father figure in this novel, takes a prominent and formative role in the life and development of the male central character. The coming summer holidays are to be spent with Father Gerald. Until then the boy has to have made up his mind and is expected to inform Father Gerald whether his intention is to enter the priesthood or not.²⁵⁶ On the prospect of spending the summer with the priest, the teenage boy tries to find out whether he would be fit for entering priesthood as well. He starts to develop fantasies, again sexual ones, and doubts if he would ever be able to listen to somebody’s sexual confessions without lusting after experiencing the acts revealed in the confessions himself.²⁵⁷ Another difficulty about becoming a priest becomes clear to the boy very soon – the fatal irreversibility of the decision of becoming a Roman Catholic priest:

At least you had a choice now to go out into the world and get women, but once you were a priest you were a priest for ever, there’d be no choice left, and once you were trapped in your own choice would you stay quiet in it or go crazy? A priest all your days, (...) and never in all those days to have touched and entered the roused flesh of a woman in her heat, (...) and her hands stroking the nerves to ecstasy. Where was fear of hell gone, scorched and frenzied bodies howling on steaming stones and irons through the boredom of eternity, the racks and tortures? (...) You’d master it as a priest. You’d give your life back to God, you’d serve, you’d go to death in God’s name and not your own. (...) All your life would be a death in readiness for the last moment when you’d part with your flesh and leave. You’d be safe. (...) ²⁵⁸

²⁵³ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 100.

²⁵⁴ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 208.

²⁵⁵ Clarity, James F. “John McGahern, Chronicler of Irish Rural Life, Dies at 71”
The New York Times 31 July, 2008.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/31/books/31mcgahern.html?pagewanted=1&ei=508...>

²⁵⁶ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 54.

²⁵⁷ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 54-55.

²⁵⁸ McGahern, *The Dark*, 55-56.

When he arrives at Father Gerald's house, the clergyman shows the boy his room and does not seem to have any intention at all to leave his young guest alone. He stays a little and it appears as if the clergyman "expected to say a closer goodnight than the word."²⁵⁹ The boy goes to bed soon and feels rather uncomfortable in Father Gerald's house. His feeling does not betray him, as the boy is soon to discover. Later that night Father Gerald knocks at the door to the boy's room and asks to be allowed to come in to talk a little:

"You don't mind, do you – it's easier to talk this way, and even in the summer the middle of the night gets cold."

(...) The bodies lay side by side in the single bed, (...) and you stiffened when his arm went about your shoulder, was this to be another of the midnight horrors with your father. His hand closed on your arm. (...) The roving fingers touched your throat. You couldn't say or do anything.

(...)

"Have you come to any decision (...)?" he moved his face closer to ask, his hand quiet, clasping tighter on the shoulder.

"No, father," (...).

"What troubles you most? Do you want to be a priest?"

"Yes, father [but] I don't think I'm good enough, father," was what you said [and] tears started to flow down your face.

(...)

"Have you ever wanted or desired to kiss?"

"Yes, father," (...)

"Did you take pleasure in it?"

"Yes, father," it choked out.

"You excited yourself, (...). You caused seed to spill in your excitement?"

"Yes, father."

(...)

"Did you try to break it?"

"Yes. Always after Confession."

(...)

"This is the most reason why you're not sure (...)?"

"Yes, father. (...)"

(...)

"Had you ever to fight that sin when you were my age, father?" you asked, (...).

"The only thing I see wrong with you is that you take things far too serious, and (...)" he completely ignored the question. "Most of those in my youth who became priests were gay. (...) They made good normal priests." (...)²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ McGahern, *The Dark*, 67.

²⁶⁰ McGahern, *The Dark*, 70-74.

Understandably, the young protagonist feels betrayed and let down and is no longer capable of believing that Father Gerald has ever been without sin. The boy regrets having admitted his inner self to the clergyman and wishes he could turn back time.²⁶¹ The teenager feels deeply ashamed and masturbates into his sock to ease the pain and the dark heavy feelings of guilt that always torture him when he indulges in masturbation.²⁶² However, this act of masturbation only causes him to be even more ashamed as “[he’d] broken the three weeks discipline since Confession, [he’d] not be able to go to Communion in the morning.”²⁶³ In the long passage cited above, latent homosexual leanings lying within Father Gerald can be noticed.²⁶⁴ The clergyman himself says in the passage cited above that a great part of the priests are homosexual. From this we can safely conclude that homosexuality – probably unimaginable and therefore non-existing in the Ireland of that time – used to be another reason for entering priesthood in order to save one’s soul and to avoid exclusion of one’s own society. Moreover, Father Gerald appears to have difficulties in accepting or integrating his own (homo)sexual desires into his life as well: in “*Memoir*” we learn that sexuality and physical functions did not use to have any place in Irish society. John McGahern explains that people were sexually frustrated as “[d]octrine separated body and soul. The soul was eternal and belonged to God. The body that carried it was unclean, prone to sin and disease, (...)”²⁶⁵ The Irish novelist is probably right when he says in one of his interviews that

“[the Church] caused most serious damage in the area of sexuality. It made something that’s difficult, (...), something which in my opinion should be a celebration. Everything was a sin, especially any contact between the sexes, except in marriage and for the reproduction of children. The Church created a fear of intimacy.”²⁶⁶

In the following part of the story, the boy himself might be seen as a kind of father figure: when he goes to town to visit his sister Joan who works there. He finds out that she is sexually harassed by her employer. In an attempt to save her the male protagonist tells the employer’s wife that Joan is coming with him.²⁶⁷

²⁶¹ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 74.

²⁶² Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 75.

²⁶³ McGahern, *The Dark*, 76.

²⁶⁴ Cf., Maher, *Catholicism*, 91.

²⁶⁵ McGahern, *Memoir*, 18.

²⁶⁶ Murphy, *Reading The Future*, 140-141.

²⁶⁷ Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 92 – 95.

In a situation that appears to be hopeless for the girl her brother acts very much like an adult and helps her out – without thinking about any consequences or fear of how others, especially their father, might react to this decision. When Father Gerald learns what the boy has just done he is rather annoyed at this incident. However, the protagonist does not appear to be in any way insecure anymore – quite the contrary. Apart from this, the priest even attempts to apologize for what happened the night before

“None of what I said was meant to make you uneasy. Only because I was uneasy myself. I’m not usually like this, hardly ever, I don’t know what got into me,” his hand rested a split second on your shoulder in reassurance.”²⁶⁸

On their way home, Joan is deeply worried about what their father might say to her having quit her job and coming home. Her brother tries to comfort her and tells her they will simply tell Old Mahoney the truth. When Joan wonders what she might do next, he suggests that she should go to England.. Because Joan cannot bring herself to cheer up, her brother starts to imitate their father to distract her from her worries:

“So you’re home, are you? Where’s the food going to come out to fill extra bellies. God, O God, O God, what did I do to deserve this cross? The poor-house, it’s the poor-house ye’ll all wind up in, and ye needn’t say I didn’t warn ye.”²⁶⁹

When the boy and Joan arrive, Old Mahoney and his other children are just having dinner. The children are happy to see Joan again:

“Joan, Joan. Joan’s home,” the army of children showed shouting of delight on their faces, but it was suppressed, because of their father’s presence. They gathered shyly round her, she was the attraction. No one had ever been away for so long before.”²⁷⁰

Also here we find parallels to John McGahern’s life: one of his sisters, Rosaleen, became a trainee assistant to a family drapery. The draper advanced her sexually, which she told her brother in silence as they were always very close. McGahern decided to visit her and to take her back home to their father.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ McGahern, *The Dark*, 102.

²⁶⁹ McGahern, *The Dark*, 105.

²⁷⁰ McGahern, *The Dark*, 106.

²⁷¹ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 186.

After the children have gone to bed, the teenage boy and his father are alone. Old Mahoney tries to find out what has happened, not only in Joan's case but also at the house of Father Gerald, which the boy left sooner than initially planned.²⁷²

His son, however, suggests her going to England to train as a nurse:

"What'll she do now?"

"I don't know."

"Stay here and wear the arse off herself sitting on chairs"

"No."

"There's not enough of you as it is to feed, is there? How could anyone do anything with such a pack about him?"

"She can go to England."

(...)

"But England's rotten, full of filth and dirt. No girl could be safe there."

(...)

"What about yourself? How did things go between you and the priest?"

"I'm not going on to be a priest," (...) It was hard to believe the words he'd said were final yet.

(...)

"May God direct you. Go to your bed now. There's no use hanging over the rakings in the dark."²⁷³

Just like John McGahern's father used to complain about the alleged misbehavior of his children, Old Mahoney also is well able to evoke feelings of guilt in his son for rearing him and also supporting him financially:

One long grind of study faced you through that winter if you were to get anywhere in the exams and the kitchen was no place for concentration. (...) Mahoney was hammering, the sharp crack of sprigs driven in, and the grating of the rasp on leather, confused into the moral character of Henry of Navarre. (...) The guilt that you sat over books while he slaved into the night was driven home to the quick.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Cf., McGahern, *The Dark*, 107-109.

²⁷³ McGahern, *The Dark*, 108-109.

²⁷⁴ McGahern, *The Dark*, 110.

4. AMONGST WOMEN

4.1. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVE

“*Amongst Women*”, which took John McGahern about seven to eight years to be completed²⁷⁵, was a huge commercial success in France, Great Britain and the author’s home country Ireland when it appeared in 1990.²⁷⁶ It also was praised by critics and won various literary prizes.²⁷⁷

John McGahern’s fifth novel, “a novel of substance”²⁷⁸ which is not divided into chapters, is primarily about Moran, an ageing, disillusioned veteran of the Irish War of Independence, bitter about the outcome of what he once fought for, like several of McGahern’s father figures:

Moran is the perfection of the type, an unforgettable combination of paternal autocracy, embittered nationalism, atavistic piety, twisted love and, probably most of all, a ruinous fear of life itself.²⁷⁹

Again, McGahern’s readership encounters a very dominant father figure, an old veteran of the Irish War of Independence, “in a poignant struggle to come to terms with the past.”²⁸⁰ Often the Irish novelist depicted father figures who are physically and/or sexually abusive alcoholics, like in his most controversial novel “*The Dark*”.²⁸¹ In this novel, however, we are confronted with a physically violent father figure; the old veteran Michael Moran, who marries Rose to escape his loneliness, does not appear to drink or to approach any of his children sexually. However, he used to apply physical violence when his children were younger as Rose’s mother, who does not like her son-in-law Moran, is soon to find out when she talks to his children to learn about him what she has always known:

²⁷⁵ Cf., Murphy, *Reading the Future*, 148.

²⁷⁶ Cf., Holland, *Re-Citing the Rosary*, 57.

²⁷⁷ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 215.

²⁷⁸ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 148.

²⁷⁹ Cronin, John. “John McGahern: A New Image?”. *Irish Writers and Their Creative Process*. Ed. Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellgouarc’h. Gerrards Cross: . Smythe Jahr, 1996, 116.

²⁸⁰ See blurb of *Amongst Women*.

²⁸¹ Cf., Cahalan, *Female and Male Perspectives*, 116, 121-125.

'People say he used beat ye.'
 'People said that because Daddy never let us mix with them.'
 'Did he not beat ye?'
 'No ... now and again when we were bold, but like any house.' Shame
 as much as love prompted the denial.
 'How is it that your brother left and never came home?'
 'Daddy and Luke could never get on. They were too alike,' and when
 Maggie began to cry Rose's mother saw that she had pressed too hard.
 (...)

Rose's mother was not reassured by Maggie's answers but she liked her and didn't want to endanger their young presences about the house.²⁸²

As the reader learns later in the novel, Moran is getting weaker and therefore even loses a fight against his youngest child Michael. As mentioned at the beginning of this M.A.-Thesis, in the novels "*The Barracks*", "*The Dark*" and "*Amongst Women*" we encounter fathers at different stages of their lives: here, we can clearly see a father who stops the application of physical violence because of his fading physical strength and because his children are getting more and more powerful, physically as well as mentally. Moreover, it has been argued that "*Amongst Women*" reminds readers of "*The Barracks*" in various ways:

The novel offers a household much like the Reagan household in which the blinds are drawn down, the rosary is said, and everyone inches closer towards death, but McGahern uses this material to extend the probing reflections and the stylistic innovations of *The Pornographer* and *High Ground*.²⁸³

John McGahern's last novel is divided into several thematic episodes:

Moran's courting of, and marriage to, Rose, his second wife; the gradual breaking away of the children from, in particular, their father; Maggie's departure for London, where she will work as a nurse; the school exams of Mona and Sheila and their subsequent move to Dublin; Michael's sexual initiation at fifteen with 22-year-old Nell Morahan, come home from New York for a few months; Michael's revolt against Moran when threatened with brutal flogging, and his flight to London; a hay saving incident, during which the family, with the exception of Luke, experiences a powerful feeling of bonding; and finally Moran's illness, death and burial.²⁸⁴

²⁸² McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 34.

²⁸³ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 216.

²⁸⁴ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 233.

In “*Amongst Women*” the reader is confronted with an omniscient narrator who enables an objective presentation of the events and characters in the book, especially Moran’s character,²⁸⁵ who is frustrated about the outcome of the Irish War of Independence and the country which Ireland has developed into since this fight for independence from British rule.

‘(...) It was a bad business. (...) The war was the cold, the wet, standing to your neck in a drain for a whole night with bloodhounds on your trail, not knowing how you could manage the next step toward the end of a long march. That was the war: not when the band played and a bloody politician stepped forward to put flowers on the ground.

‘What did we get for it? A country, if you’d believe them. 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.’²⁸⁶

This is the first time that Moran talks to his daughters about the war openly. Otherwise he hardly ever refers to his past, like John McGahern’s father who did not reveal anything about his life before he had children.²⁸⁷ It was only when he was older that John McGahern could ask his father about his past without having to fear anything. However, he did not get an answer to his questions “[as] (...) any enquiry was met with a low glare and silence, the thumbs rotating slowly around one another, and he would simply rise and leave.”²⁸⁸

Also towards his best and only friend McQuaid, who he alienates in the end, the family tyrant Moran expresses himself in the same frustrated manner:

‘Many of them who had pensions and medals and jobs later couldn’t tell one end of a gun from the other. Many of the men who had actually fought got nothing. An early grave or the emigrant ship. Sometimes I get sick when I see what I fought for,’ Moran said.²⁸⁹

“*Amongst Women*” is John McGahern’s last novel and “[portrays] rural Catholic family life”²⁹⁰, something the author was a master of:

(...) because it concentrates on one family and implicates the rest of Ireland only incidentally, *Amongst Women* also succeeds in transcending local and national circumstances. It offers an astute

²⁸⁵ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 216-217.

²⁸⁶ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 5.

²⁸⁷ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 47.

²⁸⁸ McGahern, *Memoir*, 49.

²⁸⁹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 15.

²⁹⁰ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 78-91.

analysis of power relations in a closed community, it asks disturbing questions about the mystique of home and family and, in particular, it subjects the institution of patriarchy to remorseless scrutiny.²⁹¹

The story takes place on the male central character's Great Meadow, a farm in the west of the Irish midlands²⁹², in an "isolated, rural setting [filled with] the rituals of country living"²⁹³, a setting often chosen by the Irish novelist.²⁹⁴ Although no explicit date is mentioned, we can assume that the story takes place in the time of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the decades after the Irish War of Independence.²⁹⁵ Temporal hints are only given in form of references to months, to seasons of the year as well as to holidays and events like Christmas, haymaking and harvesting.²⁹⁶ Because of the isolated rural setting of this story the reader gets the feeling of a life of "timeless quality" on Great Meadow, one means of conveying a deceitful sense of stability Moran desperately clings to: "[T]here is a sense of timelessness, as if people as well as the setting and the action existed outside of time."²⁹⁷

This piece of Irish literature can be regarded as a group portrait, in which the family tyrant Moran is the center of attention as well as of the family to which each of his children, three daughters and a son, and also his second wife Rose Brady, a woman in her late thirties²⁹⁸, feels a deep emotional bond. Rituals and routines like the saying of the rosary are carried out to keep the members of the family together and especially to maintain Moran's position as the center of attention:

(...) it is really a group portrait, a study of the fearful and exciting tensions and the calming rituals that bind the family members so they can ignore the passage of time. The father is at the center of this portrait, emotionally frozen in time and unable to adapt with any grace

²⁹¹ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 79.

²⁹² Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 233.

²⁹³ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 221.

²⁹⁴ Cf., Kamm, *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, 176.

²⁹⁵ The Irish War of Independence, in which the Irish fought for their independence from the British Empire, took place from 1919-1921. For more information see: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/294199/Irish-War-of-Independence#tab=active~checked%2Citems~checked&title=Irish%20War%20of%20Independence%20--%20Britannica%20Online%20Encyclopedia>, 17 September, 2008.

²⁹⁶ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 222.

²⁹⁷ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 221.

²⁹⁸ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 80.

to the changes that threaten his vulnerable and authoritarian position, (...).²⁹⁹

Moran, a widower on the eve of his life and the pater familias of this novel³⁰⁰, lives with his children Michael, his youngest one, Mona, Sheila and Maggie, and later also with his second wife Rose, the childless stepmother³⁰¹, on Great Meadow, a farm the old guerrilla fighter purchased from the redundancy pay he once received from the Irish army after the war.³⁰² The pension from the Irish Republican Army to which he would be entitled, however, the ageing veteran never accepts.³⁰³ McQuaid, Moran's only friend, is incapable of understanding why his old comrade from the war does not take the money which Moran has a right to:

'It makes no sense your not taking the IRA pension. You earned it. You could still have it in the morning,' McQuaid said.

'I'd throw it in their teeth,' Moran clenched and unclenched his hands as he spoke.

'I never question the colour of any man's money. If I'm offered it I take,' but Moran was too consumed to respond and McQuaid went on.³⁰⁴

Moran, however, admits that he "was thinking of taking it."³⁰⁵ McQuaid on his part does not easily give up on this topic:

"Wouldn't it buy something for the girls here or put someone through school even if you didn't want to take it for yourself? You should have taken it years ago. In this world you don't exist without money. And there might never be another world.' McQuaid could not resist this hit at Moran's religiosity.³⁰⁶

As Moran feels denied in his role as a founding father of the Irish Free State he is possibly too proud to accept the pension from the Irish Republican Army: he might feel it is just a poor compensation for the disappointment in what he once fought for as a young man.

His eldest son Luke lives in London after fleeing his stubborn, violent father: when his first born child started to fight for a more independent and self-

²⁹⁹ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 217-218.

³⁰⁰ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 79.

³⁰¹ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 80.

³⁰² Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 83.

³⁰³ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 15.

³⁰⁴ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 15.

³⁰⁵ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 20.

³⁰⁶ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 20.

determined life, Moran threatened him with physical violence which caused Luke to leave Great Meadow forever in order to start a new life in London.³⁰⁷ Although the old veteran despises Luke's independent life in London as "English"³⁰⁸, his love for his elder son is considerably deeper than the affection he feels for his second son and his three daughters.³⁰⁹ The ageing widower is desperate to hear any news about Luke and equally angry about the fact that he is incapable of controlling his eldest son anymore.³¹⁰ Still, however, Michael Moran insists he loves all his children equally³¹¹, which some passages in John McGahern's last and most praised novel³¹² may prove. When Luke does not come home for Christmas, Moran emphasizes that "[a]ll the members of my family are equal even if they think otherwise. They should never be looked down on or excluded. Not even if they want to exclude themselves."³¹³

4.2. THE FATHER FIGURE IN "AMONGST WOMEN"

4.2.1. MICHAEL MORAN AND HIS FAMILY – "THE LARGER VERSION OF HIMSELF"³¹⁴

As he weakened, Moran became afraid of his daughters. This once powerful man was so implanted in their lives that they had never really left Great Meadow, in spite of jobs and marriages and children and houses of their own in Dublin and London. Now they could not let him slip away.³¹⁵

"*Amongst Women*" starts when the main character's life is gradually approaching its end. Moran is old and ill and becoming depressed.³¹⁶ In an attempt to lift their father's spirit, the old veteran's daughters Mona, who never gets married in

³⁰⁷ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 226.

³⁰⁸ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 227.

³⁰⁹ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 234.

³¹⁰ Cf., Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 149.

³¹¹ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 89, 117.

³¹² Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 215.

³¹³ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 98.

³¹⁴ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 22.

³¹⁵ McGahern, John. *Amongst Women*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990. 1.

³¹⁶ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 80.

contrast to her two sisters³¹⁷, Sheila and Maggie attempt to revive Monaghan Day, a kind of Remembrance Day Moran used to celebrate once a year in late February with his only friend left: McQuaid.³¹⁸ McQuaid and Moran once fought in the same flying column in the Irish War of Independence³¹⁹: while Moran was the commander of this flying column – “a bunch of killers”³²⁰ –, McQuaid was his lieutenant and therefore his subordinate.³²¹ The celebration of Monaghan Day with McQuaid used to be *the* highlight in Moran’s repetitive, monotonous life on his farm Great Meadow:

(...) [Monaghan Day] is “large, heroic, blood-mystical”, [and a narrative flashback to a representation of what it was actually like reveals how [Moran and McQuaid] have sentimentalized the past.³²²

From the cited passages which concern Monaghan Day we can safely assume that this day of celebrating the Irish War of Independence was hugely important so that even his daughters used to be fully concerned with it:

[McQuaid’s visit and Monaghan Day are] so important to him that he tyrannizes his children in the interest of making it a success and then, through an inability to acknowledge anyone as peer, an insistence on imposing his own viewpoint, he alienates his only friend.³²³

Moran’s daughters, who visit their father’s home as often as possible also as married adults with children, explain their stepmother Rose what Monaghan Day exactly is and then assemble to celebrate this Remembrance Day with their old, bitter father. They spare no efforts to be with him:

Maggie flew over from London (...), Mona and Sheila met her at Dublin Airport and the three sisters drove to Great Meadow in Mona’s car. (...) With the years they had drawn closer. Apart, they could be breathtakingly sharp on the others’ shortcomings but together their individual selves gathered into something very close to a single presence.³²⁴

Reading this passage, we can safely conclude that it proves the message of the beginning of John McGahern’s last novel: Moran is thoroughly implanted in his daughters’ lives. As a consequence of this, his children, especially his three

³¹⁷ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 1.

³¹⁸ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 81.

³¹⁹ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 1.

³²⁰ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 5.

³²¹ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 14.

³²² Quinn, *A Prayer*, 82.

³²³ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 82.

³²⁴ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 2.

daughters, only feel safe and important when they are able to come together in their father's house, in spite of the rather unhappy childhood they have probably experienced with a tyrannical father like theirs:

“[Despite their rather complicated father] they kept returning, as if to a magnet, to what Daddy would like or dislike, approve or disapprove of. His unpredictable violences they discounted simply as they might the tantrums of a difficult child.”³²⁵

It is only when Moran's daughters are together and around their father that they feel safe and important as well as an aristocratic sense of superiority as “the Morans”. Great Meadow, therefore, only welcomes its own family and apart from McQuaid and the children's partners nobody ever visits the house or is invited. This means that not even Moran's daughters' husbands and children could ever be fully accepted members of this almost aristocratic family.³²⁶ Eamon Maher argues that returning home regularly appears to be something typically Irish: especially those Irish migrants who grew up in a rural environment make the impression of having a nostalgic tendency to return to the ‘auld sod’, which appears to be one more important reason for Moran's children to visit him and Rose regularly. Consequently, not only Moran seems to enforce these frequent visits but also the Irish mentality which appears to make Irish people miss their country or home place no matter how far away they are.³²⁷ In connection with the children's migration to London and Dublin, also Antoinette Quinn emphasizes “the exile's attachment to the fatherland.”³²⁸ Maggie's, Mona's and Sheila's psychological attachment, even dependence on their father can also be inferred from the fact that Moran's daughters and even his second wife Rose call him “Daddy” throughout the masterpiece “*Amongst Women*”: “[The term] “Daddy” [is] used throughout the novel to suggest the play of authoritarian power that may be disguised by sentimental and clichéd gestures.”³²⁹ The annual haymaking on Great Meadow is an important event, shared by all the family members – except Luke – even when Moran's children have already left their father's home:

The remembered light on the empty hayfields would grow magical, the green shade of the beeches would give out a delicious coolness as they tasted again the sardines between slices of bread: when they were

³²⁵ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 144.

³²⁶ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 82.

³²⁷ Cf., Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 148.

³²⁸ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 79.

³²⁹ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 218.

away the house would become the summer light and shade above their whole lives.³³⁰

Maggie, who is the second child after Luke to leave Great Meadow, later returns for her first visit from London, where she trains as a nurse. It is only then that she and her two sisters feel complete again:

By the time Maggie had to go back to London they had never felt closer in warmth, even happiness. The closeness was as strong as the pull of their own lives; they lost the pain of individuality within its protection. In London or Dublin the girls would look back to the house for healing. The remembered light on the empty hayfields would grow magical, (...); when they were away the house would become the summer light and shade above their whole lives.³³¹

On the last Monaghan Day he celebrated with his only friend, the old widower Moran, apparently a rather possessive character by nature, seemed to continue his domination over his former lieutenant, although the war had taken place a very long time ago. His old friend McQuaid, however, discontinued his annual visits exactly for this particular reason: as he managed to turn into a rich, successful businessman due to his prospering cattle trade business he did not accept Moran's suppressive behavior any longer. While McQuaid indeed enjoyed talking about the war and indulging in war memories from time to time, he was not willing to maintain his former subordinate role as lieutenant to Moran any longer.³³² Moreover, McQuaid dared to take side with Luke³³³ and to tell Moran that "the young will have their way."³³⁴ Another source of conflict was the fact that Moran was envious, because his former comrade had exceeded him in worldly success and was able to find his way in the society created in the Irish Free State after the war.³³⁵ Considering the fact that it was Moran who once lent his friend money to start his later very successful cattle business, McQuaid's financial and worldly success must be an even greater source of pain and envy to the old, withdrawn and bitter veteran of the war.³³⁶ Reading the following passage from "*Amongst Women*" we can safely assume that McQuaid's life went on in the Irish Free State and its society created after the war, while his old friend Moran still denies every

³³⁰ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 88.

³³¹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 85.

³³² Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 82.

³³³ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 233.

³³⁴ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 13.

³³⁵ <http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/past/history/19251932.html> 10 October 2008.

³³⁶ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 13-14.

development as well as the country he once fought for full of passion and idealism:

The light was almost gone when [McQuaid's] white Mercedes came slowly along the road and turned into the open gate under the yew tree. Moran did not move even after the car stopped. In fact, he instinctively stepped backwards into the plantation as the car door was thrown open. (...) [McQuaid] came slowly and deliberately across the fields to the back door. Though he had lived for weeks for this hour he now felt a wild surge of resentment towards McQuaid as he came into the house.³³⁷

Like Sergeant Reegan in "*The Barracks*", another veteran of the Irish War of Independence and father figure in John McGahern's novels, also Moran does not feel he is remembered or in any way appreciated in his role as founding father of the Irish Free State.³³⁸

On McQuaid's last visit Moran's former lieutenant already "felt for the authority he had slowly made his own over the years, an authority that had outgrown Moran's."³³⁹ In contrary to his former visits, McQuaid does not consume as much alcohol as he used to do. Additionally, McQuaid does not spend the night at Moran's house on his last visit, another clear sign that he would never return to this house again:

'Mr McQuaid's room is ready,' Maggie said as they prepared to take their leave for the night. 'The bed is aired.'

'Oh, I forgot,' McQuaid said hastily. 'I have to be hitting the road any minute now. I should have told you earlier but it must have slipped the old mind.'

Moran did not protest. (...): in all the years they had been coming together on Monaghan Day McQuaid had always spent the night in the house.

'I told my old lady I'd be home,' McQuaid lied as he rose. '(...) She gets afraid on her won in the house at night.' (...)

As on all the other Monaghan Days (...) he had come intending to stay the night. Tonight a growing irritation at Moran's compulsion to dominate, to have everything on his own terms or not at all, had hardened into a sudden decision to overturn the years and quit the house at once. (...) Moran (...) knew the evening, all the evenings, were about to be broken up and he withdrew back into himself.³⁴⁰

³³⁷ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 10-11.

³³⁸ Cf., Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 141.

³³⁹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 18.

³⁴⁰ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 18-21.

McQuaid on his part does not only refuse to allow Moran to dominate any longer him but even appears to pity his friend and his stubbornness. As he left on his last visit Moran heard him say: “Some people cannot bear to come in second.”³⁴¹ With this break McQuaid associates himself with Luke’s flight from his father: not only did Moran’s friend take side with Luke, he even dared to leave him and to choose to go his own way. Luke and his independence are also the reason why Moran denies his second wife Rose every bit of independence³⁴², probably because he fears being left alone again.

While the daughters never learn and understand why McQuaid does not appear anymore³⁴³, Moran attempts to downplay the deep pain and frustration he feels over the loss of his best and only friend McQuaid and the celebration of Monaghan Day, the day on which the times of war and glory were discussed and celebrated. Moran rather tries to badmouth McQuaid of who he says he was only drinking too much alcohol on every Monaghan Day anyway.³⁴⁴ Although Moran, as just explained, feels deeply sorry about losing his only friend “he could [never] bring himself to say the words that would diffuse the tension.”³⁴⁵ When his three daughters try to revive Monaghan Day at the beginning of this novel, we learn that McQuaid has been dead for a very long time already, probably another source of pain as Moran could not bring himself to apologize to his best friend and war-time comrade while he was still alive.³⁴⁶

As soon as the ageing farmer understands that his only friend is lost forever and he also realizes that all his children are leaving his farm Great Meadow gradually, Moran starts to court Rose Brady, later his second wife and a childless woman in her late thirties.³⁴⁷ As just explained Moran, the patriarch in a word, remarries to escape loneliness. However, he also does so,

“because he believes that it is only the talismanic presence of a mother figure that will keep ‘his family’ (22) – on which he depends for status

³⁴¹ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 226.

³⁴² Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 226.

³⁴³ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 222.

³⁴⁴ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 4.

³⁴⁵ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 150.

³⁴⁶ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 4.

³⁴⁷ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 80.

– together. (...) he believes that only women have the power to bind the family unit emotionally: (...)”³⁴⁸

Rose Brady, Moran’s later wife, truly is the personified “power that is able to bind the family unit emotionally” as we might infer from the following passage from “*Amongst Women*”:

Her true instinct was always to work behind the usual social frameworks: family, connections, positions, conventions, those established forms that can be used like weapons when they are mastered. Behind them she could work with a charm and singleness of attention that became so smooth as to be chilling, except for the friendliness of her large grey eyes. [Concerning getting closer to Moran she] was able to conceal her restlessness, (...) her dream of a different beginning to a new life, her impatience with the old shapes that she had used for too long; she was not young and was old enough to foresee failure.³⁴⁹

After spending twelve years in Glasgow where she successfully worked as a children’s nursemaid for the Rosenblooms, Rose Brady returns to her own family to nurse her terminally ill father who dies in the end, a phase in her life she shares with Elizabeth Reegan. Although her former employers in Scotland beg her to return and to work for them again, her preference is to stay on her family’s farm together with her mother and her brother. After some time Rose feels the growing desire of living her own life, very much like Elizabeth Reegan, the main character in “*The Barracks*” does.³⁵⁰ Because of this reason Rose, who John McGahern describes as “lean and strong, too neat and plain of feature ever to have been beautiful but her large grey eyes were intelligent and full of willfulness and energy”³⁵¹, tries to win the single-father’s heart. The woman is so focused on achieving her aim to get closer to Moran that she totally ignores all the gossip spread about the outcast in the village³⁵². Rose also throws her own family’s warnings to the wind which the reader learns from the following passage, a conversation between Rose and her mother:

‘They say he’s no ornament,’ her mother said carefully.
‘I was talking to him in the post office.’
She saw her mother look at her sharply. ‘They say he’s one sort of person when he’s out in the open among people – he can be very

³⁴⁸ Holland, *Re-Citing the Rosary*, 72.

³⁴⁹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 24-25.

³⁵⁰ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 22-23.

³⁵¹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 24.

³⁵² Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 23.

sweet – but that he’s a different sort of person altogether behind the walls of his own house.’
‘People talk too much about other people round here. Often the talk is just ignorant malice.’³⁵³

Rose, apparently the total opposite of her later husband Moran, is fascinated by the single-father from the first moment onwards when they meet at the local post office Rose drops by at to have some time for herself and away from her mother and brother:³⁵⁴

She had heard dark mutterings about him but after a few minutes of talking with him she was ready to put it down to common envy. She found him attentive, intelligent, even charming, but with a distinct sense of separateness and pride that she found refreshingly unlike any of the other local men she had known.³⁵⁵

The woman feels attracted to the ageing widower because of his “inner power (...), an aura that was also the source of his earlier charm at the dances”³⁵⁶. In reality, however, the ageing farmer Moran is not so much a source of power and a man capable of conveying safety, but rather like an animal that fears to be in the open and also to be regarded as an idiot by other people. Due to this sensitivity, even vulnerability, the single-father prefers to remain within the close boundaries of his house and his farm³⁵⁷, as well as his family, “the larger version of himself.”³⁵⁸ Because Moran’s top priority and only interest is his family, he always warns his son(s) and daughters urgently to “[b]e careful never to do anything to let [themselves] or the house down.”³⁵⁹ In the course of the novel the reader learns that Moran regrets having alienated his only friend McQuaid, “but in a way he had always despised friendship; families were what mattered, more particularly that larger version of himself, *his* family; (...).”³⁶⁰ While the family is only one of McQuaid’s many interests³⁶¹, Moran actively discourages all his children from getting in touch with other people like fellow-villagers, as he regards friendships and any other kind of social contacts as a sign of commonness. Therefore, “[h]e successfully indoctrinates his children with the

³⁵³ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 24.

³⁵⁴ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 26.

³⁵⁵ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 23.

³⁵⁶ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 230.

³⁵⁷ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 230.

³⁵⁸ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 22.

³⁵⁹ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 83.

³⁶⁰ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 151.

³⁶¹ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 83.

idea that such reclusiveness denotes exclusiveness and that to be ‘proud’ and ‘separate’ is a mark of distinction (...).”³⁶² Moran is so successful in manipulating his daughters that they themselves consider social contacts of any kind as proof for commonness. When Maggie leaves for London to start her training as a nurse, her father and her stepmother accompany her to the train station:

[Moran] dressed carefully in the brown suit he had married in and he bought the ticket with quiet authority. As he wasn’t friendly with anyone present he had no occasion to speak to others waiting about on the white gravel. Rose knew many of the people on the platform even though she had spent half her life in Scotland and she responded to each greeting with warmth, careful to watch that her friendliness did not grate on Moran. Maggie was silent.

She, too, in spite of the dances and concerts they had been attending lately, knew far fewer people at the station than Rose. Maggie looked on this isolation he had built up around them as distinction and strength. In her heart she felt Rose was a little common in knowing so many people. Moran stood erect and apart on the platform, totally separate as he gazed at the hill (...)³⁶³

Also Sergeant McGahern’s enjoyed having his world closed to the outside environment and did not like seeing his children mixing with others.³⁶⁴

As mentioned earlier Moran feels he is forgotten and unappreciated in his role as a founding father of the Irish Free State. Additionally, the former gunman is unable to start a successful career in the Irish Army after the war. To compensate his disillusionment with the state and its society he helped to make possible, he decided to set up his own dominion, Great Meadow and his family, and therefore “directs his frustrated drive for power into a diminished form of home rule.”³⁶⁵ Emotionally frozen and fully incapable of accepting change and development as a necessary, vital and natural part of life, Moran makes his house a fortress, protecting him of any intrusion that could possibly endanger his authoritarian position as a family tyrant and his childish wish to be the permanent center of the family’s attention.³⁶⁶ Moran tries to conserve time. In order to make himself feel

³⁶² Quinn, *A Prayer*, 83.

³⁶³ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 62-63.

³⁶⁴ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 148.

³⁶⁵ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 232.

³⁶⁶ Cf., Samspon, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 230.

stability and security in his life, he establishes “a repertoire of routine actions”.³⁶⁷ Especially the saying of the rosary every night appears to convey a feeling of safety as well as guarantee of authority within the family. Sadly for Moran he is unable to prevent his children from growing up, despite all his fierce efforts. Keeping away from the rest of the world is another desperate effort to resist the flow of life. There are various reasons for Moran’s childish behavior: as already explained, he is bitter about the Irish Free State, and Luke’s absence is paining him constantly. As Moran is also scared of death, possibly because he is rather unable to make the best out of his life and to seize the day, he shows an “instinctive vulnerability to anything that comes from outside the family unit. (...) [As a consequence of this he] is sustained solely by his desperate clinging to the fiction of family.”³⁶⁸

Moran’s influence, however, does not reach beyond his farm and family as McQuaid’s discontinuation of his annual visit proves. Reading this novel it becomes clear that Moran somewhat wishes that the war in which he once fought would have never ended – or never happened at all:

‘For people like McQuaid and myself the war was the best part of our lives. Things were never so simple and clear again. I think we never rightly got the hang of it afterwards. It was better if it had never happened. (...)’³⁶⁹

Reading how Rose and Moran meet and get closer, it appears as if it was Rose who would court Moran, instead of Moran wooing Rose, as several scientific articles from secondary literature might suggest:

Her interest was too great. She had too little time. There was too much of the outlaw about him that held its own fascination. Painfully and in the open she had to make all the running.

She came to the post office the next evening, and the next, (...), each time managing to leave the post office alone with Moran. They stood talking a long time at the crossroads before separating but he didn’t offer to see her over the weekend.

(...)

In the full face of the ridicule she went to the post office evening after evening, ridicule she willed not to see or notice.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 233.

³⁶⁸ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 234.

³⁶⁹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 6.

³⁷⁰ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 25.

In spite of the fact that people in the village have already started talking about her, the former children's nursemaid vigorously pursues her aim of starting a new life, a life of her own together with Moran and his children from his first marriage, which no member of the Moran family ever refers to throughout the whole novel.³⁷¹ In marrying the ageing widower Michael Moran, Rose hopes to fulfill her dreams of escaping her days as a servant – to employers and also to her own family – and to be “the mistress of her own establishment”.³⁷² Although she revives the whole house, even cleans and paints it which she pays from her money she earned when she was working as a children's nursemaid³⁷³, and manages to establish close adult-friendships with Moran's children Michael, Mona, Maggie and Sheila, she is merely a servant to Moran and has a status in his family equal to his offspring:

(...) it is clear that he does not envisage a partnership of equals. Rose is to serve as a loyal and devoted second in command and at some future date, when his children have departed, to become his sole subordinate. Rose, (...) is ideally suited to the role of compliant wife and surrogate mother.³⁷⁴

Moreover, Moran feels a great fear of the poorhouse and worries about the costs for renovating the house which is the reason for Rose paying the beautifying renovations from her own money.³⁷⁵ Considering the fact that Moran is scared of ending up as a pauper it appears as quite surprising that the old veteran never accepts the pension from the Irish Republican Army. While Rose always attempts to intervene as a mediator between the members of the Moran family, her husband becomes insulting:

There's no need for you to go turning the whole place upside down. We managed well enough before you ever came round the place.³⁷⁶

Sadly, also Elizabeth is told by her stepson Willie that actually she is not really needed: while she tries to develop a solid and good relationship to her stepchildren of who she once thought they would regard and love her like a

³⁷¹ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 87.

³⁷² Quinn, *A Prayer*, 84.

³⁷³ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 49.

³⁷⁴ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 85.

³⁷⁵ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 49.

³⁷⁶ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 69.

second mother, she only receives the painful proof of not being of any importance to Una, Sheila and Willie.³⁷⁷

Just like the former lieutenant McQuaid also Moran, a family tyrant like his former friend and comrade from the war, concedes women the right to personal independence and freedom.³⁷⁸ Both of them even consider the opposite sex to be inferior, minors to men as flashbacks to the Irish War of Independence might reveal to the reader:

The audience for Moran's first recounting of his war memoirs in the novel are his wife and daughters and to them he claims that his flying column did not shoot women and children, treating both categories as minors or inferiors, as was traditional in a certain male code of chivalry.³⁷⁹

Antoinette Quinn argues that "[p]atriarchy in *Amongst Women* derives from patriotism."³⁸⁰ As suggested several times in this chapter, Moran is frustrated about the outcome of the war and according to John McGahern, his behavior was normative for Moran's and McQuaid's generation of fighters. While McQuaid found his place in the new society Moran failed to do so and therefore "directs his frustrated drive for power into a diminished form of home rule."³⁸¹

Moran even goes so far to prevent Rose from being in touch with her own family, which she revives, however, after a couple of years.³⁸² Because Rose once lived abroad and was employed for a couple of years before she married Moran, she possesses some money of her own which the readership gets to know from various passages in "*Amongst Women*" like the following one:

After his sisters left, [Michael] discovered that he was attractive to women but it was older women that he was drawn. From Moran he inherited a certain contempt for women as well as dependence on them but it did not diminish his winning ways. The one drawback was his lack of money. To go about with young women he needed money and Moran would not part with any. He went to Rose. She gave him a little money but grew alarmed when he began to come home late at night.³⁸³

³⁷⁷ Cf., McGahern, *The Barracks*, 35.

³⁷⁸ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 220.

³⁷⁹ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 82.

³⁸⁰ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 81.

³⁸¹ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 81.

³⁸² Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 224.

³⁸³ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 91-92.

It is exactly this independence that Moran attacks. Rose, however, manages to maintain her integrity and even to ensure her place within the Moran family, which her husband accepts in the end.³⁸⁴ Although Rose has difficulties keeping her good humor, warmth and optimism she has the chance to compensate her complicated marriage with the friendships she develops to her stepchildren, the renewed contact to her own family and fellow-villagers.³⁸⁵ Within the limited possibilities on Great Meadow Rose is able to maintain her integrity, her social skills and her positive attitude to life. She is especially successful with Moran's children who blossom under her protection and attention she devotes to them:

She establishes her own domestic rituals in counterpoint to Moran's [especially the saying of the Rosary], the tea against the rosary, and from the beginning she devotes her loving and optimistic temperament and her diplomatic skills to the children.³⁸⁶

Although her social skills like her natural kindness and the ability to pay genuine attention to each of her stepchildren are visible throughout the whole novel, she is rather unsuccessful with Moran, who – as explained in this M.A.-thesis – does not believe that he will ever be able to change his character.³⁸⁷ Sampson points out that on their honeymoon Rose becomes aware of how wrong it was to marry Moran.³⁸⁸ About this John McGahern writes that Rose realizes that “[H]er life was bound up completely with this man she so loved and whose darkness she feared.”³⁸⁹ Within the narrow boundaries of Great Meadow, Rose manages to bring in warmth, love and comfort: Sampson regards her as the novel's moral center, which John McGahern agreed with in various interviews. In “The Solitary Reader” he once wrote that “*Amongst Women*” depicts how difficult it used to be for Irish women “to try to create space to live and love in the shadow of violence.”³⁹⁰ From this we may conclude that not only Moran representative of his (male) generation, but also Rose appears to show “typical” female features, especially Irish female features. Right on the first evening Rose spends with the children to be introduced to them “[t]hey were already conspirators. They were

³⁸⁴ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 226.

³⁸⁵ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 224.

³⁸⁶ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 233.

³⁸⁷ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 236.

³⁸⁸ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 232.

³⁸⁹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 60.

³⁹⁰ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 234.

mastered and yet they were controlling together what they were mastered by.”³⁹¹
In his autobiography John McGahern explains how he and his siblings managed to master their tyrannical father: in his novels there is a tendency of children knowing their fathers’ moods exactly and therefore developing the ability to handle them appropriately or at least best possible. John McGahern and his siblings grew very close over the years and quickly learned never to trust their own father. They excluded him and in the end “[they] were mastering [their] master.”³⁹²

However, even a person as stubborn as the male central character in “*Amongst Women*” can be charming as the following passage proves:

Sometimes the moods were of pure charm, like asking one of the girls to go with him over the fields to look at the cattle as if he were inviting them to a special part in his heart.³⁹³

Also John McGahern’s father had moments in which he could be the most charming and gallant person:

“[Though] [n]either [his mother] nor my father had any sense of humour, (...) [t]he difference between them was great as well. My father was intelligent and could be charming, (...). Though he was vain and proud as she, he was never boastful: ‘Nobody blows themselves up other than fools. If you need praise, get others to do it for you.’”³⁹⁴

Although Sergeant McGahern was able to be a charming, attractive man he did not forget to expect his environment to reflect exactly this behavior. If the people around him did not pay him enough attention his moods tended to change.³⁹⁵

Also Moran has the habit of not praising his children. After Sheila’s and Mona’s success at their final exams he does not praise them but tries to downplay their achievements towards others with the excuse that the praise is all the better if other people do it for him.³⁹⁶

³⁹¹ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 233.

³⁹² McGahern, *Memoir*, 160.

³⁹³ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 131.

³⁹⁴ McGahern, *Memoir*, 6.

³⁹⁵ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 23.

³⁹⁶ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 86-87.

As already mentioned, also McQuaid is an example of a domestic tyrant, a man despising women, something he already proved in the guerilla war when he shot a girl while she was relieving herself outdoors.³⁹⁷ However, not only during the war but also afterwards he thinks of women to be inferior, always in need of a man to enable them to manage their lives:

‘How are your lads?’
‘You know they’re all married now. I don’t see much of them unless they want something and they don’t see much of me. They’re good lads though. They work long hours.’
‘And the good lady?’
‘Oh, the old dosey’s all right. She needs plenty of shouting at or she’d go to sleep on her feet.’
They had married young and their three sons married young as well. They lived alone now (...). He was seldom in the house except to eat or sleep and when he was all he ever did was yell, ‘Get the tea. Polish the boots. Kick out that bloody cat. Get me a stud. Where’s the fucking collar?’³⁹⁸

As explained earlier both Moran and McQuaid are domestic tyrants who deny women every bit of independence. This appears to be strange as they once fought for national independence. From the cited passage above we can infer another important difference between McQuaid and his friend: while McQuaid easily talks about his family, Moran “[has always] particularly disliked parting with information about the house”³⁹⁹ which becomes obvious when McQuaid asks about Moran’s sons, especially Luke.

Moran talks to his eldest daughter Maggie about his plans to marry Rose and insists he does it thoroughly in the best interest of the whole family.⁴⁰⁰ In reality, however, the old widower fears the loneliness he could possibly experience as soon as all his children will have left the house.⁴⁰¹ Still, however, Moran pretends to feel the need for and importance of a woman and (step)mother in the house and especially for the children. He does not become tired of asserting towards his children that his primary interest is his family:

³⁹⁷ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 83.

³⁹⁸ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 13.

³⁹⁹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 12.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 27.

⁴⁰¹ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 233.

‘There’s something very important that concerns all the family that I want to discuss seriously.’ (...) ‘What would you think if I were to bring someone new into the family?’

Maggie looked quickly at him but without comprehension.

‘If I was to fill your mother’s place – the Lord have mercy on her soul – with someone new,’ he amended. ‘If I were to marry again.’

(...) Maggie burst into sobbing. This continued for a long time during which he shuffled his feet uncomfortably, controlling his immediate impulse to shout at her to be quiet. (...)

‘A woman would be able to help you in ways I can’t,’ he said. ‘There’s only so much a man can do on his own,’

[Maggie] knew that whatever she said would be irrelevant anyhow.

(...)

‘If you think it’s for the best, Daddy.’

‘(...) I wouldn’t even think of it for a minute if it wasn’t best for everybody. After all these years it’ll be a real house and home again. It’ll be a place that will always be there for you to come back to.’⁴⁰²

After Susan’s death, John McGahern’s father intended to remarry, also insisting he would like to do so in the best interest of his children.⁴⁰³

While marrying Moran means the initiation of a whole new life to Rose, the old widower’s life does not seem to be changed in any way:

He came in his old trousers and nightshirt. [The children] were already dressed for the wedding, (...). He (...) [was] looking around him (...) in dumb bafflement: it was a wedding day, a shining moment in his life, and, except for the dressed children, it could be any ordinary day.⁴⁰⁴

After trying to warn Rose off Moran and their wedding, which takes place despite everything, Rose’s family pities her, but still acknowledges that in the end it is her life and also her responsibility to decide how to live her life best – and happily ever after:

‘She had many admirers,’ the old mother said (...).

‘Many admirers... Many admirers...’

‘Nothing could stop her. She was determined on it. Now it’s her life,’ her married sister said gently.

‘I hope she’ll be lucky,’ the wife of one of the brothers said without any feelings.

(...)

They were a very close family but in the years to come no gathering or wedding, (...), was ever held in any one of their houses. They went to big hotels as if determined never again to experience anything like this

⁴⁰² McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 27.

⁴⁰³ Cf., McGahern, *Memoir*, 180.

⁴⁰⁴ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 39.

house wedding in all their mortal lives. Neither Rose nor Moran ever attended any of the gatherings. They were never invited. They would not have gone if they were.⁴⁰⁵

Considering the fact that Rose is described as a person with brilliant social skills like tact, diplomacy and the greatest singleness of attention for each of her stepchildren, one can safely assume that Rose Brady would have gone to family gatherings if invited, quite in contrast to Michael Moran who is depicted as a truly antisocial person who himself admits to his children that dealing with other people has never belonged to his strengths – quite in contrast:

‘They say you should have gone to the very top in the army after the war but you were stopped. McQuaid always said they set out to stop you,’ Sheila said with borrowed vehemence.

‘I was stopped all right but it wasn’t as simple as poor McQuaid made out. In an army in peace time you have to arselick and know the right people if you want to get on. I was never any good at getting on with people. You should all know that by now,’ he said half humorously.⁴⁰⁶

Maggie is the first of Moran’s daughters to leave the house:

What was (...) clear was that the house’s need of Maggie had disappeared. Rose brought this up very gently to Moran. (...)

‘She’s almost nineteen. The day is gone when a girl waits around till some man needs a wife. She should have the protection of some work.

‘What job of any good would she get here? She left school at fourteen. She wasn’t all that good at school either.’

‘There’s a shortage of nurses in England.. (...) I’ve spoken to her and she’s interested.’

‘You were quick off the mark, weren’t you? A lot of our people go wrong in England.’⁴⁰⁷

After a while, also Moran has to admit to himself that his eldest daughter Maggie should probably leave the house, however, his motivation is very different from his wife’s as we can infer from the following passage from “*Amongst Women*”:

Moran began to see how little Maggie had to do in the house and that she needed money for dances and clothes now. (...)

‘Do you still think that Maggie should go to England to nurse?’ he asked eventually.

‘I do. She’d always have something to fall back on. You never know what is going to happen in a life. It’s a profession.

‘I don’t know. I was very much against it when that brother of hers wanted her to go. Of course he wasn’t interested in what was good or bad for the girls. He was doing it against me.’⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 44-45.

⁴⁰⁶ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 5-6.

⁴⁰⁷ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 49.

Luke has already attempted several times to make his elder sister come to London to escape their despotic father's grip. Now that Rose has suggested a nurse training for Maggie, Moran's eldest daughter is finally somewhat free to start a life of her own. In the end Maggie leaves for London to start her training as a nurse.⁴⁰⁹ The Moran family decides to write a letter to Luke in which they ask him to pick up his sister at the station. Corresponding to his over-sensitive nature, Moran reacts angrily. Rose tries to calm him down and suggests "do[ing] the generous thing, then [Moran] can't be blamed."⁴¹⁰ In the end it is Moran who writes the suggested letter to Luke, who answers via telegram, that he would be happy to welcome his sister in London. Having expected a letter from his alienated son as the only appropriate reaction to the one he wrote to him, Moran is deeply hurt and feels denied in his existence, "like a right fool out in the bloody open."⁴¹¹

Also her sisters, Mona and Sheila, fight to free themselves: both are extraordinarily good students and – like the boy in "*The Dark*" – take shelter in their studies as "[t]hey felt safe and protected when they studied."⁴¹² While they are waiting for the results of their school leaving exams, Sheila considers following her siblings Maggie and Luke to England:

They were only weeks away from the examinations halls. So much work still had to be done, so much work had to be gone over again. The chance-throw of the exam would almost certainly determine the quality of much of the rest of their lives. Sheila especially had dreams of university. Much could be won, a great deal more could be lost, and there was always England.⁴¹³

When Sheila's exam results finally arrive it turns out that she did perfectly well in her finals. Her envious father, however, tries to downplay Sheila's and also her sisters Mona's achievements as they drive him out the center of his family's attention.⁴¹⁴ The former guerilla fighter even goes so far to take it for granted that Mona, whose exam results are very good as well, and Sheila would start working

⁴⁰⁸ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 50.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 221.

⁴¹⁰ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 50.

⁴¹¹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 51.

⁴¹² McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 64.

⁴¹³ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 72-73.

⁴¹⁴ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 86-87.

in the civil service straight away. However, Sheila even wins a scholarship which would enable her to attend university. Moran's daughter, who would like to study medicine, tries to explain to his father that the scholarship she won would cover most of the expenses for the six years she would need to complete her studies in medicine. The rest she could finance with money she would earn from doing jobs. Having tried every argument possible, Sheila finally gives up as she has to admit to herself that her stubborn father will keep his support withdrawn from her. Moran for his part has his reasons for not supporting his daughter's ambitious plans:

Sheila could not have desired a worse profession. It was the priest and doctor and not the guerrilla fighters who had emerged as the bigwigs in the country Moran had fought for. For his own daughter to lay claim to such a position was an intolerable affront. At least the priest had to pay for his position with celibacy and prayer. The doctor took the full brunt of Moran's resentment. (...) Throughout, Moran did not attempt to influence Sheila directly but his withdrawal of support was total.⁴¹⁵

Again we can see that Moran feels that people who did not fight for Ireland's freedom and independence have benefited from his efforts. Because Sheila feels helpless and knows that her father will not change his mind she decides against studying medicine and in favor of a job at the civil service, Moran's original assumption. Moran assures his second daughter he never wanted to spoil her plans to study:

‘I didn't want to stand in your way, that's why I said nothing but I can't help thinking it is closer to your measure.’
‘How?’ Her anger brought out his own aggression.
‘How, what? How, pig, is it?’ he demanded.
‘What do you mean, Daddy?? I didn't understand what you said, that's all,’ she was quick to change but she refused to withdraw.
(...)
‘Going for medicine is a fairly tall order, isn't it? Even with scholarships it takes money. I consider all my family equal. I don't like to see a single one trying to outdistance another.’⁴¹⁶

Again Moran has succeeded in keeping his family as close around him as possible. However, we can safely assume that Sheila indeed could have accepted the scholarship to attend university and study medicine if only she had really desired to do so. It appears to be a lot more uncomplicated to blame her father

⁴¹⁵ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 88.

⁴¹⁶ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 88-89.

instead of asserting herself. Moreover, it has been already mentioned that especially Moran's daughters feel the urgent need to return to their father's house as often as possible to feel their life has meaning and importance. Mona's attending university has never been at issue as she decided to start a job in civil service already before her final exams.⁴¹⁷

Even though Moran has destroyed Sheila's dream of studying medicine and his other children know how successfully he tries to keep the family together for his own good, "Moran's offspring do not really want childhood to end."⁴¹⁸ Especially the three daughters keep returning to Great Meadow as if their father's house was a source of energy and approval quite in contrast to their brothers Luke and Michael who simply run away⁴¹⁹ and lead a life much more independent than their sisters could ever manage to do:

Moran has inculcated in them an aristocratic belief in the importance of their house and family, a disabling fantasy, and one which the rest of the world discounts. (...) They have never achieved autonomy and need 'a sense of belonging'. (...), his daughters are so emotionally crippled by him that they cannot fly away from Great Meadow. (...) His children's Dublin or London homes are never allowed to rival the parental home.⁴²⁰

Denis Sampson even goes so far to suggest that Moran's children appear to share their father's fear of death.⁴²¹ Returning to Great Meadow regularly seems to ease this fear of dying: "Within [Moran's] shadow and the walls of his house they felt that they would never die."⁴²²

Although there is some temporary revolt against the tyrannical Moran, the children – especially the daughters – are simply unable to live without their father:

There is a suggestion that Sheila's sexual initiation during her honeymoon has given her a strength "not to be bullied", but "she knew instinctively that she could not live without [the family]." (...) And Sheila does return regularly to be revived, to become one of "the

⁴¹⁷ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 89.

⁴¹⁸ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 223.

⁴¹⁹ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*,

⁴²⁰ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 89.

⁴²¹ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 231.

⁴²² McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 94.

aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow”, not simply a “speck of troth” on the “tide” of city life.⁴²³

Sampson suggests in his article “*Amongst Women. The Troubles and the Living Stream*” that not only Moran could be compared to an animal in his fear of being exposed, but also his children, especially his daughters, quite in contrast to Michael and above all Luke:

The children’s need for the “animal comfort” of the house and the desire to have “the whole world shut away outside” suggest that Great Meadow is a kind of cocoon they reenter. What is referred to as their sense of recovering “a completed world” and of regaining a sense of being “whole” becomes a dogma of their adult life which they use to enforce discipline, a discipline that fails in the case of Luke: (...) ⁴²⁴

Moran truly is a founder of a new dystany, the Morans. He never refers to his parents. Everything is only and thoroughly about him.⁴²⁵ His house and farm are his fortress, his territory of reign. Antoinette Quinn argues that “[t]he syntax turns Moran and his house and farm into interchangeable entities, a complex of person and place that constitutes a fatherland.”⁴²⁶

In the course of time Maggie meets Mark, her later husband, who she also takes home to introduce him to “Daddy”. Mark feels uncomfortable in Moran’s company: Mark feels that being on Great Meadow is like being “in a jail” and “like moving about in a war area”.⁴²⁷ Additionally, his impression is that he is expected to behave “manfully”, “with manly aggression” when with his father-in-law.⁴²⁸ Sean, Sheila’s husband-to-be, however, appears to have an easier time winning Moran’s appreciation:.

Sheila’s boyfriend, Sean Flynn, (...) attracted most of Moran’s attention who assumed she would not have drawn him into a family situation as delicate as the present one if she did not intend to marry him. Sean Flynn was flattered; he was used to pleasing. They talked about politics, the land the Flynns farmed in Clare, his huge family and they both agreed that the family was the basis of all society and every civilization. Moran enjoyed himself and felt cheated when the time came for them to head back for Dublin.⁴²⁹

⁴²³ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 232.

⁴²⁴ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 231.

⁴²⁵ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 83.

⁴²⁶ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 81.

⁴²⁷ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 232.

⁴²⁸ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 87.

⁴²⁹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 117.

This passage proves that “*Amongst Women*” is by no means restricted to an Irish context, rather it transcends it and Moran celebrates the universality of the cult of the family.⁴³⁰

Eventually, Sheila and Sean decide to get married. Sheila, who appears to be more independent than her sisters, does not ask for her father’s approval and even invites her elder brother Luke to her wedding. She only informs Moran and her stepmother about Luke’s coming when they are already in Dublin to attend the wedding. Moran is visibly angry about this information, probably because he was not asked for his consent, but tries to appear indifferent. He attempts to assure his family that “[he is] glad [Sheila] invited him,’ (...). ‘I wouldn’t like to think that any member of my family was ever excluded from a family gathering,’ (...).”⁴³¹ During the wedding Luke and Moran merely ignore each other. At the end of the wedding, however, Luke walks over to his father, apparently a sign for a certain willingness to reconcile with his old father. Luke walks over to Moran to thank him for the beautiful wedding he paid:

‘Aren’t you travelling further than this after all these years?’ Moran asked as his son seemed about to turn away.
‘I have to be back in London this evening. (...) I have work to do there.’
‘There’ll be work long after you’re dead and gone.’
‘I know that but it will not be my work,’ Luke said (...).
‘God help you,’ Moran said.
‘Goodbye then. If you are ever in London it would a pleasure to see you.’
‘We’ll not be in London.’ Moran refused his son’s hand.⁴³²

Although Maggie reproaches Luke afterwards that he did not make enough effort he continues his life and feels he has done enough to enable reconciliation. The passage cited above is also essential in so far as it is the only time in the novel in which the readers encounters the remote, mysterious Luke “personally”: throughout “*Amongst Women*” we only learn about Luke, his character and motivations “through the filters of his siblings’ reports (...).”⁴³³

⁴³⁰ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 86.

⁴³¹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 152.

⁴³² McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 155.

⁴³³ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 227.

Despite the fact that Maggie and Sheila get married, although not to dominant men while Mona renounces on marriage altogether, there is still an oedipal attachment to Michael Moran, their father and their first man:

[Moran], (...), looks on [his daughters'] husbands or male friends as rivals and is content when these prove 'no threat' to his primal place in their affections. (...) it is this latent incestuous relationship with Moran, the perpetual virginity of her daughterhood, that Sheila violates when she leaves him in the hayfield to go indoors to make love to Sean.⁴³⁴

Even after their father's death and burial the children, especially the daughters keep returning to Great Meadow to visit their stepmother Rose and therefore allow her to replace Moran after his death.⁴³⁵

4.2.2. LUKE AND MICHAEL – FILIAL ALIENATION

While Michael Moran's three daughters consciously attempt to remain invisible in their authoritative father's presence and turn silent whenever he enters a room⁴³⁶, his sons Luke and Michael are a lot more visible to the lonesome farmer. Especially his eldest child Luke is a constant source of terrible agony to Michael Moran because he does not allow his father to control him any longer and lives a life far away from his father's house and farm. Moreover, the old veteran, who possesses the strong will to live forever, feels denied in his existence and his manliness by Luke, who is more real in his absence than his daughters or his second wife Rose are in their (constant) presence. Moran's sense of manliness derives from fighting in the Irish War of Independence, in which he encountered death and violence.⁴³⁷ Physical combat is the only confrontation and proof of manliness he accepts. This becomes clear when the reader learns about his fights with his two sons Luke and Michael.⁴³⁸ While Moran pretends not to care very much about his prodigal son Luke, he is desperate to hear about him and the independent life he leads in London from his younger sister Maggie who also lives there. Moran is fully aware of the sad fact that he is incapable of reintegrating Luke into his family. Still, however, he is not willing to openly

⁴³⁴ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 88.

⁴³⁵ Cf., Holland, *Re-citing the Rosary*, 74.

⁴³⁶ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 53.

⁴³⁷ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 234.

⁴³⁸ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 86-87.

admit his failure and to make reconciliation possible. John McGahern once “suggest[ed] that this kind of behavior was normative in the revolutionary generation to which Moran and belong.”⁴³⁹ From this we can infer that possibly many veterans of the Irish War of Independence were frustrated about the result of their fights for freedom and independence from the United Kingdom after centuries of oppression: the Irish Free State, later Irish Republic of Ireland, and its new society. Moran is – as mentioned before – rather unwilling to reflect upon himself and his behavior and insists that “[t]he ground can’t be changed.”⁴⁴⁰ His wife and children are expected to tolerate this with the greatest affection possible.⁴⁴¹ Towards the end of his life, however, the old veteran can finally bring himself to write a letter of apology to his eldest child Luke. However, he does not receive the reply he was hoping for:⁴⁴²

‘(...) Pay no attention to me. I wrote to that older brother of yours, “My capabilities are of little matter now”, but I suppose I might be as well off writing to myself for all the answer I’m likely to get.’(...) A quick glance between Rose and the girls was enough for them to know that it was better to make no mention of their elder brother.⁴⁴³

While Moran seems to be very bitter about his son who he is unable to win back, Luke does not appear to be unforgiving but also not longing for being in touch with his father again:

‘(...) I didn’t choose my father. He didn’t choose me. If I’d known, I certainly would have refused to meet the man. No doubt he’d have done likewise with me,’ Luke laughed for the first time in the meeting [Sheila’s wedding].⁴⁴⁴

As suggested several times in this M.A.-Thesis, Moran’s Great Meadow is a closed space, locked for strangers and only welcoming its own members:

Beneath all differences was the belief that the whole house was essentially one. Together they were one world and could take on the world. Deprived of this sense they were nothing, scattered, individual things. They would put up with anything in order to have this sense of belonging. They would never let it go. No one could be allowed to walk out easily.⁴⁴⁵

⁴³⁹ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 227.

⁴⁴⁰ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 229.

⁴⁴¹ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 229.

⁴⁴² Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 224.

⁴⁴³ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 4.

⁴⁴⁴ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 144.

⁴⁴⁵ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 145.

Considering the fact that the family means everything to Moran and his daughters, desperate efforts to reintegrate Luke and Michael become all the more comprehensible as well as the great pain over knowing all too well that Luke – in contrast to his younger son Michael – is lost forever, especially to his father:

[Luke's] absence is like a curse on Moran. Nothing is more moving in the book than the bewildered, begrudging and wholly ineffective efforts of the man to re-embrace his first-born.(...) As Moran tears at this wound that will not heal we feel the pity of his life, and he becomes almost forgivable.⁴⁴⁶

We learn about Luke only through his siblings' filters as can be noticed from the following passage:

'Daddy would love it if Luke came home though he cannot say it,' Rose said.

'I told him that,' Maggie said warmly. 'I asked him, was he afraid to go home or what was wrong with him. He was rude – the way he looks at you! You never can tell *what* he is thinking.'

'What did he say?'

'He said that only women could live with Daddy.'

'He has some neck. Something's wrong with him. He won't live and let live,' Sheila added.⁴⁴⁷

The relationship between power and gender is another essential theme in this novel: as already suggested, the alienated McQuaid and Luke scratch on Moran's ego and sense of (male) supremacy. The women in his life, however, stay:

Moran is first encountered "amongst women," an ailing old man fussed over by his wife and three daughters, (...) for Moran's physical weakness has transformed relations between him and his womenfolk to fear on his part and dominance on theirs. However, even at his most physically incapacitated, Moran has still not lost his hold over his daughters: (...).⁴⁴⁸

Luke does not even return to Great Meadow for his father's funeral, although his sisters urge him to do so:

[Rose and Moran's daughters] all strive to keep the focal point of the family happy at all costs. The boys, Luke and Michael, are different. Luke leaves home under a cloud, never to return. When his sisters pester him to visit their father before he dies, Luke makes the comment that 'only women could live with Daddy.'⁴⁴⁹

An incident taking place towards the end of Moran's life may prove what Luke means. Moran rises from his sickbed to shoot a bird that has been annoying him:

⁴⁴⁶ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 226.

⁴⁴⁷ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 132-133.

⁴⁴⁸ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 81.

⁴⁴⁹ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 149.

The next morning they were idling in the luxury of a long breakfast, (...), when a single shotgun blast came from the front room. They looked at one another in fear, moving quickly as one person to the room. He was standing at the open window (...), the shotgun in his hand, staring out at the front field where (...) a jackdaw lay on the white ground beneath the ash tree. (...)

‘That bloody bird has been annoying me for days.’

‘You’ll get your death of cold standing there at the open window,’ Maggie complained (...).

‘You didn’t miss anyhow.’ Rose was intent on laughing away the (...) situation.

‘I don’t think Daddy ever missed,’ Mona said.

‘The closest I ever got to any man was when I had him in the sights of the rifle and I never missed.’ (...)

The gun was returned to its usual place in the corner of the room and no more mention was made of the dead jackdaw.⁴⁵⁰

From the cited passage above we can safely conclude that the women in Moran’s life excuse his behavior and even try to downplay it as in the case of the shot bird.⁴⁵¹ The sentence “They looked at one another in fear, moving quickly as one person to the room.” again points out the emphasis that the family places on being one, without any space for individuality and personal aspirations. Moreover, this incident clearly shows that Moran’s killer instincts from his time as guerilla fighter have remained throughout his life and resurface even in situations as the one cited above. A very important element in this passage as well as in the whole novel is the gun which has its fixed place in the house, another clear proof of the fact that Moran is incapable of solving conflicts with words and mutual understanding.⁴⁵²

Because Michael is the youngest of Moran’s five children he has always been protected and spoiled by his three elder sisters who used to treat him like their own child. After Maggie has left to live and work as a nurse in London and Mona and Sheila have departed to start a new life in the capital Dublin, Michael is totally on his own and therefore at his gruesome father’s mercy, only protected by his stepmother Rose. Moreover, he loses his interest in gardening completely as soon as his elder sisters have left their father’s home. He misses their praise and admiration for his work in the garden and therefore he gives it up. As he has few interests outside his garden, he tries to find other fields like going out and

⁴⁵⁰ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 6-7.

⁴⁵¹ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 228.

⁴⁵² Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 228.

discovering his attractiveness to women.⁴⁵³ When Michael starts going out and also coming home too late as well as drunk he soon experiences what it means to incur his father's terrible rage as we learn from the following passage:

'This is a nice hour,' he said.

'I was in town. I couldn't get a lift back. I had to walk.'

'What were you doing in town?'

'There was a dance.'

'Did you ask to go to the dance?'

'No.'

'No *what*? No, pig!'

'No, Daddy.'

Moran beckoned him to come in and as he was passing him in the narrow hallway he seized him and struck him violently about the head. 'I'll teach you to come in at this hour! I'll teach you to go places without asking! (...)'

Sheltered by his sisters, Michael was unused to any blows and angrily cried out as soon as he was struck. There would have been a violent struggle but for Rose's appearance.⁴⁵⁴

When Michael meets Nell Morahan, a young woman at the age of 22 and therefore seven years older than Moran's youngest son, he feels attracted to her and gets deeply involved with this woman. He starts staying away from school to be able to spend more time with his older girlfriend with who he also experiences his sexual initiation.⁴⁵⁵ With Nell the young man probably feels free and enjoys traveling around with her in her own car, a clear sign of how independent this young lady is. Nell is a symbol of "the social change [that reaches] Great Meadow, (...), [she] seduces young Michael, [who is] still just a schoolboy."⁴⁵⁶ While his sisters do not approve of this relationship Rose keeps her good humor but is still careful about letting her husband Moran know about Michael's girlfriend Nell. After having had sex with Nell for the first time he returns home and has to confront his sisters:

(...) in the morning he had to face his sisters' furious resentment. Openly and not a little proud he met their anger. They could not take him for a child any more. (...) They could not risk telling Moran. (...) When the girls told Rose, she laughed heartily.

'Well, didn't Michael fall on his feet. Who'd ever think it?'

'Look at their ages. We'll be nothing but a laughing stock,' they said angrily.

⁴⁵³ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 91.

⁴⁵⁴ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 92.

⁴⁵⁵ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 101.

⁴⁵⁶ Maher, *Catholicism*, 92.

‘In a few months there will be not a word about it. Nell will go back to America and that will be that; but don’t bother Daddy with a word,’ she counselled.⁴⁵⁷

Considering the fact how strongly Ireland was shaped by religion and the Roman Catholic Church back then, it comes as a surprise that these two young people seem to enjoy a certain freedom, though they have certainly not been allowed to have pre-marital sex. John McGahern succeeds in revealing another change which does not only affect Moran’s family but is a sign of a changing society in general, a change that never was Eamon de Valera’s⁴⁵⁸ intention, quite in contrast:

The pastoral image of Ireland envisioned by de Valera is changing, so it is not accidental that the sexual independence the children discover at the dances is linked, especially in the case of Michael, to the introduction of the private car.⁴⁵⁹

On the one hand Michael is definitely allowed a lot more freedom than his sisters. On the other hand, however, he lives an individuality and independence “the house [and therefore Moran] does not allow.”⁴⁶⁰ It seems reasonable to assume that Michael is in the advantageous of being a man. Certainly his sisters would not experience such a tolerance – and probably they would not dare behave like their younger brother. Also, they only leave Great Meadow for Dublin and London with their father’s blessing, quite in contrast to their brothers Luke and Michael who simply run away.⁴⁶¹

Although Michael appears to be deeply in love with Nell, his father appears to have passed on “a certain contempt for women as well as a dependence on them.”⁴⁶² Sampson argues that this becomes visible in Michael’s “sexual appetite and his desire to “tomcat it out into the wild”(AW 95)”.⁴⁶³ However, also his sisters do not seem to have a high opinion of their own sex:

‘Will you look at the men. They’re more like a crowd of women,’ Sheila said, remarking on the slow frivolity of their pace. ‘The way Michael, the skit, is getting Sean and Mark to laugh you’d think they were coming from a dance.’⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁵⁷ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 103.

⁴⁵⁸ <http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/eamon.htm> 02 December 2008

⁴⁵⁹ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 221.

⁴⁶⁰ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 232.

⁴⁶¹ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 86.

⁴⁶² McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 91.

⁴⁶³ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 230.

⁴⁶⁴ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 90.

Nell is the more responsible one of the two and therefore knows that their relationship will probably not last forever. When Michael, who does not feel comfortable at home, suggests joining her when she leaves to return to the U.S.A. she rejects this as she knows that education is important especially if someone is as clever as Michael is:

That she had never gone to school a day longer than the legal requirement and had worked all her life with her hands made her value education more than those to whom it was open. 'Are you sure you're not ruining everything by skipping school like this?'⁴⁶⁵

Nell is fully aware of the fact that their relationship is not meant to continue and therefore tells Michael to return to school and to finish it. When Michael returns home his father and his stepmother are already informed about Michael's skipping school since Christmas. While Rose is disappointed, Moran is furious and attempts to punish his youngest child:

'I'm afraid you'll have to be taught a lesson as well. I want you to go to your room, take off your clothes and I'll see you there in a few minutes. Maybe we can still sort this business out just between the two of us.' So quiet and authoritative was Moran's voice that Michael actually moved to go to the room; suddenly he realized what he was being asked to do and stopped. (...) ⁴⁶⁶

When Michael understands what his father is going to do with him he escapes. His father, meanwhile becoming aware of the fact that he is not as strong as he used to be, tries to hold him back, but "[Michael] easily parried his father's lunge and ran from the house"⁴⁶⁷ and therefore escapes the terrible punishment his elder brother Luke once had to experience.

Michael flees from his father's house and runs to Nell who takes him to Dublin to his sisters Mona and Sheila. As mentioned in an earlier part of this M.A.-Thesis, Luke fled his father's house after a terrible fight in which Moran went so far to apply most brutal physical violence to punish his first born son. Michael tells Nell

⁴⁶⁵ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 110.

⁴⁶⁶ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 112.

⁴⁶⁷ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 112.

how Moran once beat Luke like he was going to beat him: “Once he made Luke take off his clothes in the room. We heard the sound of the beating.”⁴⁶⁸

Michael even flees to London. However, his sisters convince him of coming back home to Great Meadow as he should finish school in order to be free to live his life as he chooses to. Even Rose persuades him of coming home – in her own sensitive, understanding way:

‘You know your father. He’ll not change now. All you have to do is appear to give in to him and he’d do anything for you after that. He wants nothing but good for the whole house.’⁴⁶⁹

In the end, Michael returns to his father who takes him back. Also at school Michael is welcome, however, he feels as uncomfortable there as usual. His moody shape adds to a tense atmosphere at home and one evening things escalate: Moran feels his youngest son is behaving provocatively and hits him hard. Moran and Michael start a heavy fight and in the end even Moran’s gun – a part of his repertoire – joins the scene:

It was then, coldly and deliberately, that [Moran] fixed his eyes on the shotgun where it stood beside the back door in the far corner of the room. Whether he was seriously thinking of using the gun or that he wanted Michael to think he might use it he succeeded absolutely. (...) He would have given anything to discover if the gun was loaded but he couldn’t check it. He assured himself that Moran had always insisted that a gun should always be unloaded when approaching a house or climbing a fence.⁴⁷⁰

Later, however, Moran even approves of Michael’s marrying an Englishwoman and surprisingly also writes letters to his daughter-in-law.⁴⁷¹ It appears to be reasonable to conclude from this that Moran has learned from the mistakes he did with his first son, though he would probably never admit it. Moreover, Michael’s difficulties with his father appear like a crisis of adolescence, which does not seem to continue in his adult life.⁴⁷² This might be due to the fact that Michael has been spoiled by his elder sisters. According to Luke only women could live with his father. From this we could draw the conclusion that Michael has developed a kind of feminine side which might make it easier for him to handle his father.

⁴⁶⁸ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 113.

⁴⁶⁹ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 122.

⁴⁷⁰ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 120-121.

⁴⁷¹ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 224.

⁴⁷² Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 81.

4.2.3. PATRIOTISM, PATRIARCHY, CATHOLICISM AND THE ROSARY IN “AMONGST WOMEN”

“[T]he family that prays together stays together. Restore to the family its religious soul and you enrich the country, you strengthen civilization. If enough families pray, they can save the world,”⁴⁷³

Father Patrick Peyton⁴⁷⁴ once claimed. John McGahern’s last novel also has a strong focus on how he himself viewed religion and Catholicism in his native country: “ritualised, tyrannical, loveless, almost soulless.”⁴⁷⁵ In his last and most praised novel, John McGahern does not have much to say about (the characters’) personal religious beliefs or the Roman Catholic Church as such⁴⁷⁶, but – being “acknowledged [as] the chronicler of rural Ireland during the 1940s and 50s”⁴⁷⁷ – he succeeds in describing how Catholicism, the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Irish Constitution from the year 1937⁴⁷⁸ influenced Irish society genuinely and lastingly. Also “*The Dark*” and “*The Barracks*” show the firm grip of the Church on its “sheep” who could not exist as fully acknowledged members of society without being a devoted Catholic member of the Church and its rituals:

We know that this was a period when Catholicism enjoyed far more prestige and influence than it does today. The era he explores, (...), explains to some extent the recurring prevalence of Catholic rituals and practices in his novels. (...) The brand of Catholicism we encounter in McGahern’s fiction is one of authoritarian clergy and submissive laity, even though there are signs of muted revolt on the part of characters like Elizabeth Reegan (*The Barracks*) (...).⁴⁷⁹

As already explained in this M.A.-Thesis the Irish Constitution dating from the year 1937 placed great importance and emphasis on the family as it was regarded as “the basis and the microcosm for the values of a divinely ordained state.”⁴⁸⁰ To assert and secure the family’s place in Irish society, Catholicism was utilized throughout many decades after the Irish War of Independence. One means of asserting a certain social hierarchy and control over it was the importance of the

⁴⁷³ Holland, *Re-citing the Rosary*, 70.

⁴⁷⁴ <http://www.museumsofmayo.com/peyton1.htm>, 26 October 2008.

⁴⁷⁵ Maher, *Crosscurrents*, 150.

⁴⁷⁶ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 219.

⁴⁷⁷ Maher, *Catholicism*, 85.

⁴⁷⁸ Cf., Holland, *Re-citing the Rosary*, 70.

⁴⁷⁹ Maher, *Catholicism*, 85.

⁴⁸⁰ Holland, *Re-citing the Rosary*, 70.

Irish family in society and Catholicism. In connection with this the Rosary played an essential role in the maintenance of the status quo: “(...) from the 1950s onwards, the Rosary has been explicitly promoted as a means of regulating the division of power within the Irish domestic sphere.”⁴⁸¹ On his “international Rosary Crusade” Father Peyton strongly supported the Rosary to be prayed in Irish families to save the world.⁴⁸²

In her article “*A Prayer For My Daughters: Patriarchy in Amongst Women*” Antoinette Quinn explains that “patriarchy [is] the refuge of the socially ill-adjusted and emotionally immature man”.⁴⁸³ To Michael Moran the family, especially his family, is the most important thing in the world. This is also the reason why individuality and personal ambition are not accepted among the members of his aristocratic family. This oneness also becomes apparent in the application of military language: “Moran habitually refers to his children as ‘the troops,’ and they adopt silence and abjection as a ‘camouflage...for safekeeping’ during his verbal assaults.”⁴⁸⁴ The old veteran does not become tired of emphasizing that “together we can do anything” to enforce solidarity – in the first place towards himself.⁴⁸⁵ In order to be able to ensure his place within his family the former freedom fighter exhaustively relies on Catholicism, though he does it without contemplating on it in any way.⁴⁸⁶ Especially the utilization of the Rosary appears to be the ideal device to ensure Moran’s dominant position among his second wife and his daughters:

[The Rosary] is presided over by the head of the family and the five decades are allocated from eldest to youngest in descending order of importance. The internal structure of this prayer, the Creed with which it opens, the ‘Our Father’ and ‘Glory be to God the Father’ that enclose each decade, emphasize Divine fatherhood.⁴⁸⁷

The saying of the Rosary every night is one of John McGahern’s device of showing that Moran expresses himself through rituals and routines, to indulge in the illusion of security and the feeling that in this way he is able to prevent time

⁴⁸¹ Holland, *Re-citing the Rosary*, 70.

⁴⁸² Cf., Holland, *Re-citing the Rosary*, 70.

⁴⁸³ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 83.

⁴⁸⁴ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 85.

⁴⁸⁵ Cf., Quinn, *A Prayer*, 84.

⁴⁸⁶ Cf., Holland, *Re-citing the Rosary*, 69-70.

⁴⁸⁷ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 86.

from going on.⁴⁸⁸ Various rituals – Monaghan Day, the Rosary, the annual haymaking – also help Moran to fill his day. Because how to seize the day is an eternal mystery to the old guerilla fighter, he appears to feel the great need to cling to rituals which also bear the side-effect of keeping his family together.⁴⁸⁹

His special focus appears to lie on his three daughters:

Such was the strength of the instinct that they felt that they could force their beloved to remain in life if only they could, together, turn his will around. Since they had the power of birth there was no reason why they couldn't will this life free of death.⁴⁹⁰

Moran's clinging to religion and Catholicism so desperately might also result from his former vocation for priesthood, which he gave up for the sake of the fight for Ireland's freedom.⁴⁹¹ About priests he says right at the beginning of the novel: "Strange, to this day I have never met a priest who wasn't afraid to die. I could never make head or tails of that. It flew in the face of everything."⁴⁹² Sampson argues that an important message is conveyed with Moran's statement: he points out that "[t]he mystery of life's meaning, the inadequacy of organized religion for overcoming fear, the frustration at the escapable presence of death (...) [are all] held in this ordinary scene, (...)." ⁴⁹³ Having considered this it appears reasonable to conclude that also the seminary, religion and Catholicism cannot fully aid Moran in overcoming his disappointment in the Irish Free State or in finding a new and successful way into the society after the Irish War of Independence.

Despite all the dominance Moran exerts on all the members of his family he is still dominated by the women in his life: his second wife Rose and his three daughters Maggie, Mona and Sheila.⁴⁹⁴ Furthermore, his daughters do not seem to make the mistake of raising their children in fear and guilt as they were raised, a sign of subtle change within Moran fiercely preservation of the status quo.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁸⁸ Cf., Imhof, *John McGahern*, 233.

⁴⁸⁹ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 220.

⁴⁹⁰ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 178.

⁴⁹¹ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 237.

⁴⁹² McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 237.

⁴⁹³ Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 238.

⁴⁹⁴ Imhof, *John McGahern*, 232.

⁴⁹⁵ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 220.

One very prominent leitmotif in this novel is Moran's constant repetition of the question "Who cares?" which the reader encounters read on the first page of *"Amongst Women"*:

'You'll have to shape up, Daddy.. You can't go on like this. You're giving us no help. We can't get you better on our own.'
'Who cares? Who cares anyhow?'
'We care. We all care very much.'⁴⁹⁶

This appears to be another proof of how disillusioned and frustrated this former hero of the Irish War of Independence feels. No wonder religion and patriarchy appear to be the perfect compensation for Moran's shattered dreams:

Amongst Women offers a penetrating critique of patriarchy as the refuge of the socially ill-adjusted and emotionally immature man and ask probing questions about the cult of family.⁴⁹⁷

Towards the end, however, the anti-hero of this novel appears to change, though unnoticed by the people who are constantly around him:

(...) there were times when he slipped out to the fields in spite of [Rose's and Moran's daughters] care and always in the same direction. Past the old pear tree in brilliant white blossom against the wall, last year's nettles withered and tangled against the wall (...). To die was never to look on all this again. It would live in others' eyes but not in his. He had never realized when he was in the midst of confident life what an amazing glory he was part of.⁴⁹⁸

For the first time in his life Moran appears to be able to seize the day. Reading this passage towards the end of Moran's life may lead to the impression that the disillusioned hero is indeed capable of changing, though it is a very silent and private change nobody of his family appears to take notice of. Also it seems to be necessary to point out once again that Moran is probably well aware of the mistakes he made and the loneliness he created himself. Therefore, accepting his English daughter-in-law and even writing letters to her seems like a great development in Moran's emotional maturity. John McGahern does not go so far to disturb this change by explaining the reader the reason for the (anti-)hero's epiphany. Rather he prefers a subtle indication of what is going on inside the

⁴⁹⁶ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 1.

⁴⁹⁷ Quinn, *A Prayer*, 83.

⁴⁹⁸ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 178-179.

protagonist of his last novel to who the wise motto “seize the day” has been a mystery throughout his life.⁴⁹⁹

Several times in the novel it appears as if Moran was indeed a reflective person, though on rare occasions: among his favorite places in his house is the car seat in which he sits from time to time:

He went silent and dark and withdrew into himself, the two thumbs rotating about one another as he sat in the car seat by the fire. A quick glance between Rose and the girls was enough for them to know that it was better to make no mention of their elder brother.⁵⁰⁰

What appears to be an inward glance simply means that he either feels insulted, ignored or in any way threatened. Withdrawing into himself – for obvious or unknown reasons – is part of Moran’s pattern of behavior. Although Rose and the girls fail to find out what is going on inside of the old guerilla fighter, they indeed find him changing: towards his end he leaves his house to walk his land⁵⁰¹, and they frequently watch him “staring into the emptiness of the meadow.”⁵⁰² As cited above looking at his farm and the beautiful nature it has to offer makes Moran realize that everything has its end one day and the world will be turning without him as well. At this point, Denis Sampson compares the old man with Elizabeth Reegan, the central character in John McGahern’s first novel: also Elizabeth, though a much more reflective person than Moran, has her moment of epiphany when she – already suffering from breast cancer – looks out of the window and at the beautiful nature she sees out there.⁵⁰³

⁴⁹⁹ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 220.

⁵⁰⁰ McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 238.

⁵⁰¹ Cf., McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 130.

⁵⁰² McGahern, *Amongst Women*, 178.

⁵⁰³ Cf., Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, 240.

5. CONCLUSION

Studying and analyzing three of John McGahern's novels within the context of the author's autobiography "*Memoir*" can be regarded as truly revealing concerning the understanding of Irishness and of Ireland after the Irish War of Independence. The three novels "*The Barracks*", "*The Dark*" and "*Amongst Women*" are masterpieces which offer various approaches to reading the figure of the father in John McGahern's fiction: the texts provide biological fathers as well as metaphoric father figures like superiors and priests. Especially priests appear to be an ideal focus of the figure of the father as they enjoyed great power in Ireland notably after the Irish War of Independence. The Roman Catholic Church held a firm grip on Irish society after the 1920s, thus being a good Catholic was vital in this country. Moreover, it was interesting to find out in the course of this study how fathers used Catholicism and religion as a means for establishing and maintaining power within their own homes.

The special insight gained from the study of these three novels was the special way father figures develop in the course of their lives. As stated at the beginning of this thesis, John McGahern presents three fathers at three different stages of their lives: a fairly young father of small children in "*The Barracks*", a middle-aged and elderly father with teenage-children in "*The Dark*" and a father at the end of his life with adult-children in "*Amongst Women*". Even though these father figures display different attitudes to in the use of violence as an educational method with their children as well as their own attitudes towards women, they still have many things in common not only between themselves, but also if compared with the real father of John McGahern, Sergeant Francis McGahern: Sergeant Reegan, Old Mahoney, Moran and Sergeant McGahern all were freedom fighters in the Irish War of Independence, hence staunch patriots and Catholics. However, they are not only proud of their contribution to Ireland's independence; the four men are also bitter at the outcome of this war: a country still divided and a society of people who did not unanimously contribute to their country's independence but still benefit from it, without giving the freedom fighters due respect and esteem. Unable to come to terms with these new circumstances or

even to take advantage of the new political situation, they either start fighting with their surroundings or choose to withdraw from public life and into themselves.

As John McGahern's work is strongly autobiographical, it enables the reader to develop a vivid picture not only of the author's own relationship to his father but also of his life in Ireland in general. Catholicism in particular was a crucial means of establishing Irish identity, and thus became used as a means to keep Irish people under control and to instill in the Irish a deep sense of sin, especially as regards sexuality and married life. The Irish novelist provides a description of how torn people were in the Ireland he grew up in and of how much many of them feared to be confronted with the truth i.e. that the reality Irish family life differs markedly from the popularized "ideal". The very first page of "*The Dark*" caused a national shock when the word "fuck" appeared in it as well as the horrible scene of a father punishing his son physically for using that word. It comes as no surprise that this book was banned and McGahern was fired from his teaching post, a post controlled by the Roman Catholic Church.

Another theme based on autobiographical experience and addressed in all of the three novels is the theme of the exile in Irish history. In all three novels characters leave their homes, either for Dublin or for Great Britain. Though most of them return later, if only for a visit, one of McGahern's characters, Luke, decides to stay away forever to escape paternal violence and authority; thus Luke openly resists his native country's repressions, manifest in the domestic sphere of his father's despotism and stern control of "Great Meadow". However, we also learn how strongly Irish people are attached to their country: although many of McGahern's characters escape their repressive homes – and therefore a repressive country – they retain a strong sense of belonging to their native home and keep coming back as if they could not live without returning to their roots, no matter how horrible their memories might be.

However, women as well take on an important role in McGahern's fiction: in the novels discussed women, especially mothers or stepmothers, are the ones who keep the family together, something that even the patriarch Moran acknowledges in, although he appears to despise women otherwise. This attitude may reflect the

general notion in Eamon de Valera's Irish constitution of 1937, in which the role of married women is indeed restricted to the household albeit with an important function as mothers and teachers of their children in Christian ethics, religion and cultural heritage. Housewives are obliged to keep the family together, to give birth to as many children as possible and to create harmony in their homes. Even though the three father figures described in the novels analyzed are indeed more or less a representation of the traditional authoritarian *pater familias*, they are in some way also narrow-minded in that they do not always realize how the wife or their children tend to manipulate them in order to make life a little more bearable. It seems reasonable to suggest that these three fathers, and, arguably McGahern's father as well, become aware what a nuisance they are to their families and eventually also to themselves. Consequently, each of the fathers in these novels experiences a (more or less obvious) moment of epiphany - a moment in which each of them gets some insight into his shortcomings and the meaning of his existence, which finally enables his children to understand their fathers and to forgive him. The texts suggest that despite the ordeals many of the sons and daughters of the violent fathers have been exposed to a final reconciliation is possible. The breach is temporary and the majority of characters do not reject their fathers for good: Moran in "*Amongst Women*" is not hated by his children in the end; and even rebellious Luke is ready to forgive his father, even though he has emigrated and decided not to return. Reading McGahern's autobiography "*Memoir*" likewise conveys the impression of a son who has suffered but never bore a grudge against his father. John McGahern rather appears to have felt sorry for the old man who was incapable of leaving the past behind, of seizing the day, of coming to terms with himself as well as the change in Irish society and people around him.

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DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In der vorliegenden Diplomarbeit werden drei der wichtigsten und bekanntesten Romane des irischen Schriftstellers John McGahern analysiert: „The Barracks“, McGaherns Debütroman, „The Dark“, sein zweites Werk, das sofort nach seiner Erscheinung verboten wurde, und „Amongst Women“, der letzte Roman, mit dem McGahern die besten Kritiken erhielt. Das Hauptanliegen dieser Arbeit ist es, die Vaterfigur in diesen drei Romanen herauszuarbeiten und diese mit dem Vater des Schriftstellers, der prägend für McGahern war und daher entsprechend viel Platz in seiner Autobiographie „Mémoir“ einnimmt, zu vergleichen. Jedoch geht es hier nicht nur darum, biologische Väter als Vaterfiguren zu identifizieren. Vielmehr bieten diese drei Romane die Möglichkeit, auch andere Männer als Vaterfiguren zu betrachten: Priester, einen Geliebten, einen Universitätsprofessor sowie einen Dekan, den eigenen Mann und nicht zuletzt die eigenen Kinder, die – wie im Falle Morans in „Amongst Women“ – erwachsen werden und den alternden, verfallenden Vater wie ihr eigenes Kind behandeln und dominieren; wie er einst sie dominierte.

Besonders in einem irischen Kontext erscheint es sinnvoll, auch Priester als Vaterfiguren in Erwägung zu ziehen, waren diese doch viele Jahrzehnte nach dem Unabhängigkeitskrieg gegen das Vereinigte Königreich hoch angesehen und aus der irischen Gesellschaft und dem Glauben der irischen Bevölkerung nicht wegzudenken. In weiterer Folge ergeben sowohl die drei Romane, die Thema dieser Diplomarbeit sind, als auch die Autobiographie John McGaherns ein Bild der Gesellschaft Irlands in den Jahrzehnten nach dem irischen Freiheitskampf. Der Leser wird mit einer Gesellschaft konfrontiert, die einerseits von der Loslösung von Großbritannien enorm profitierte, aber andererseits auch Menschen hervorbrachte, die mit den Folgen ihres Engagements für die Freiheit und Unabhängigkeit Irlands unglücklich waren. Sowohl McGaherns Vater als auch seine (biologischen) Vaterfiguren in den ausgewählten Romanen zeigen sich frustriert ob der Tatsache, dass man nicht die gesamte Insel zurückgewinnen konnte und weiters auch darüber, dass sie offenbar in Vergessenheit gerieten und in ihrer Rolle als Freiheitskämpfer nicht gewürdigt werden. Somit verlegten sich

offenbar viele der ehemaligen Freiheitskämpfer auf die Etablierung einer Herrschaft im eigenen Heim: verbale Gewalt und körperliche Züchtigungen standen in irischen Haushalten wohl Jahrzehnte hindurch an der Tagesordnung und fanden ihre vermeintliche Rechtfertigung nicht nur in der Valeras Verfassung sondern auch in der Lehre der Römisch-Katholischen Kirche selbst. Im selben Maße wie die Ehefrauen dieser Männer mussten sich auch deren Kinder mit diesen Vätern arrangieren sowie mit Vaterfiguren außerhalb der Familie wie zum Beispiel mit Priestern, die die männliche Dominanz in der Gesellschaft Irlands zusätzlich unterstützten. Jedoch erlebt der Leser dieser Romane auch Charaktere, denen es gelingt, sich von dieser Atmosphäre der Unterdrückung und Gewalt zu befreien beziehungsweise sich Raum zu verschaffen, in dem sie bis zu einem gewissen Grad eigenständig agieren können: zum einen begegnet man Frauen, die durch die Liebe zu ihren Kindern und sogar zu ihren äußerst schwierigen Ehemännern gestärkt werden und dadurch die Schönheit des Lebens wieder entdecken, zum anderen werden Menschen charakterisiert, die erwachsen werden und im Exil, ein weiterer wichtiger Aspekt irischen Lebens und irischer Literatur, ein eigenständiges und vom Vater befreites Leben führen. Somit stehen die hier charakterisierten Väter für eine Generation von Männern, die den irischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg als mehr oder weniger sinnlos erachten. Sie symbolisieren die Atmosphäre, in der die irische Bevölkerung nach dem Freiheitskampf lebte: eine Atmosphäre voll von Verbitterung über die Jahrhunderte andauernde Unterdrückung durch die Briten, die offenbar aus einem unbändigen Verlangen nach Rache in der eigenen Gesellschaft bzw. Familie ausgeht. Gewalt, Unterdrückung durch die Katholische Kirche und deren Vertreter, Scham, Verleugnung der Sexualität und letztlich der oftmals einzige Ausweg des Exils, um die Chance auf ein befreites Leben mit Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten zu erringen scheinen das Irland John McGaherns und wohl auch vieler seiner Zeitgenossen geprägt zu haben und Stoff für viele der wichtigsten und eindrucksvollsten Werke der irischen Literatur abgegeben zu haben.

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