# McGahern: Lover of words, creator of worlds

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## Abstract

*The creative kingdom of the writer of fiction is an imaginative space full of potential. There is no shortage of examples of such writing in the work of the late Irish writer John McGahern. This text seeks to link McGahern's fictive world with notions of utopian thinking in how it can liberate the conscious from false notions of values and belonging that, in turn, affect the nature and quality of freedom of expression.*

**Keywords**: Irish literature; utopian studies; hegemonic narratives; paradigm shift; artistic freedom

The late John McGahern (d. 2006) displayed an innate talent in the manner he wrote about his experiences and how he populated his fictive world with such vivid imagery. The year of 2019 marked ten years since the publication of a collection of writings by McGahern edited by the esteemed Stanley Van Der Ziel titled *John McGahern: Love of the World - Essays*. This magnificent volume provides readers unfamiliar, and indeed those who are, with a wonderful compilation of the writer's thoughts on a range of writings down through the years.

This paper will draw on the texts contained in the above-named volume in conjunction with direct reference to the artists' six novels, *The Barracks* (**1963**), *The Dark* (**1965**), *The Leavetaking* (**1974**), *The Pornographer* (**1979**), *Amongst Women* (**1990**) and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (**2002**) in an attempt to illuminate McGahern's important role in providing essential self-critique of the Irish psyche at a particularly sensitive juncture in the development of the Irish nation. This strategy is augmented in its focus by the infusion of the concept of utopian thinking within the scope of this paper.

Much of McGahern's earlier work was moulded in a cultural context that was in flux, and with the passage of time, this process accelerated further. Indeed, the great changes in Irish society that took place between the publication of his first novel in 1963 and his last in 2002, in comparison with the present, attest to the magnification of changes that were seen in the form of precursors in McGahern's narrative fiction. While his early literary endeavours were born into a culturally stifled Ireland, his acute talent for clarity of description and a steadfast commitment to an accurate representation of his character's circumstances that punctuate their daily lives remain powerful tools in a world where instant gratification often takes precedence over calm reflection.

As noted above, McGahern's first novel appeared in 1963, also the year in which Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* appeared for the first time. This work is notable for its introduction of Kuhn's term paradigm shift. In such a context, a *paradigm* has been defined by Kuhn as meaning 'the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by members of a given community' (**Kuhn, 1962: 251**). One could argue that this construct of understanding can be taken to represent the *status quo*. Thus, any attempt to change existing cultural conditions would inevitably require strong momentum to affect such change, and the present writer would argue that with the presence of much greater levels of cultural capital in the population where young members of society (particularly the artistic classes) took part in the process of acquiring and propagating cultural, the official narrative on accepted doctrine and the differences that existed between it and the views held by this younger

generation acted as a catalyst to bring about a Kuhnian paradigm shift. Older narratives on the nature of the current (cultural) condition were thus regarded (i.e., from the 1960s) as being insufficient to account for the changes occurring and the theoretical plan on which the younger generation interpreted such events and happenings. Given this chasm of comprehension, a polarisation of views appears to be predicated by what Kuhn described as a 'crisis' in the functionality of the existing system where the crisis '…simultaneously loosens the stereotypes and provides the incremental data necessary for a fundamental paradigm shift' (**Ibid: 89**).

A crisis of understanding may or may not accompany a sense of crisis of legitimacy in respect of younger generations toward the systems of rules established by older generations. Those individuals alienated by the existing culture may seek to affect change, and it is the artistic class that quite often fills this role. In this instance, John McGahern's work was very important in questioning established norms and raising awareness of alternative narratives. What may be termed 'McGahern's World' comprises the stifling cultural conditions under which fictitious characters labour under excessively conservative cultural values that permits little respite for those who cannot wholeheartedly commit themselves to live within the parameters of established norms. These stringent conditions are primarily inspired and mandated by the constitutional regime in force that permeates all aspects of McGahern's world and are comparable with what Lyman Tower Sargent has noted in respect of a substantial body of utopias, but not all, which are concerned with key elements of life such as '… families, the workplace, recreation, and all other aspects of life as well as with economic, politics and religion' (**Sargent, 2016: 188**). Indeed, in making the family a pillar of society as per Article 41.1.1 of the Irish Constitution, the state is obliged to recognise the family as a '…fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.' Under the hierarchy of power espoused by Catholic doctrine, it is the man of the house that heads the family and yields hegemonic authority. This was the reality in McGahern's world, a decline which becomes evident in his last two novels, *Amongst Women* (**1990**) and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (**2002**).

The definition and ethos of the traditional nuclear family stood at the heart of the social policy of the state and its proxy partner in wider society: the Catholic Church. Despite McGahern's strong misgivings and eventual estrangement from his church of birth, he could not escape the influence of religion on his life and the fictive reality he portrayed in his novels. Corporal punishment and sexual impropriety bordering on abuse feature in *The Dark*. Sexual perversion and sexual gratification also strongly

feature in The Pornographer, and these arguably represent McGahern's attempt to interrogate public attitudes toward official Catholic Church doctrine on marriage, sex and sexuality. In later years, McGahern recognised that responsibility for abusive practices in public life and private morals was shared between civil society and the clergy. The character of Moran in *Amongst Women* (**1990**) displays strong totalitarian tendencies but does so by using religion as a justification.

Physical and sexual abuse perpetration by the Catholic clergy was commonplace in the world where McGahern lived when his earlier novels were published. The shared blame is something he recognised in remarks in an interview that took place after the publication of what became known as the Murphy Report, which examined clerical sex abuse in the Dublin Archdiocese. Peter Guy has considered McGahern's work within these circumstances and remarked that:

> *My belief is that the Church offered a status of sorts to the people and, in such a class-conscious society, pious supplications to the faith were the norm.*
>
> *What is apparent then is that a bargain was struck between most priests and the mercantile classes – each side served their own purposes. The clergy could be called on to perform onerous tasks for a price, to perform the rituals that perpetuated the status quo in return for comparative benefits. This arrangement helped to perpetuate the social order up to the early 1990s, but each side was obliged to keep up a façade. Propriety was absolute, and any transgressions of desire were pounced upon and denounced* (**Guy, 2010: 92**).

Monitoring for and denunciations of – real or imagined – transgressions, had the effect of depressing society and lending credibility to the term 'darkness' to describe the Irish cultural environment. This depressed state was recognised by Sean O' Faolain in his work *The Irish* in 1947 where he noted that 'much Irish literature since 1922 has been of an uncompromising scepticism, one might sometimes even say ferocity'. This assertion would appear to have been true at least until the early 1990s. Brian Liddy observes how:

> *The scentralised government of the new Irish state refused to accept the moral and artistic validity of Irish parish life; it infringed upon, and continually eroded, this validity in the name of centralisation, in the name of modern advancement. The parochial nature of the Irish became subsumed, and what replaced it was a naturalised version of a British superstructure that the Irish people had fought so desperately to uproot in the first place. The transition of power, a period at the heart of O'Faolain's work, exhibiting itself in both theme and mood, is the*

> *same transitional period today as it was in 1922. But long can a state be said to be in transition. By McGahern's era, this transition had become entrenched as the status quo, and the failure of the Irish government to live up to the expectations created by the "glorious dream" of 1916 has left a bitterness that manifests itself in the individual* (**Liddy, 1999: 107**).

One of McGahern's most respected works*, Amongst Women*, again provides his literary representation of these frustrations and dashed hopes. However, it is the act of writing that actually represents hope in its very happening.

McGahern's literary endeavours are closely aligned with the fundamental facet of the artistic endeavour that accords with J. C. Davis' construction of utopian as having to do with man's dreams of a better world, which expanded further provides for an interpretation of where 'utopias are those aspects of culture… in which the possible extrapolations of the present are explored' (**Davis, 1983: 12**). However, one must recognise that in seeking to create conditions to explore these alternative narratives (which in turn may inspire change), the writer, in this case, McGahern, is effectively carrying out an exercise that can be labelled 'the education of desire' (**Hertzler, 2000: 272**). It is thus by alerting readers to the power of their imagination and by making them aware of their own condition by qualitative description, as McGahern does in his novels up to and including *Amongst Women* (**1990**), does it then become possible to create conditions under which critical awareness of cultural and social conditions can take place. This is another key strength of McGahern's work; by actively using the power of his chosen words as 'presences as well as meanings', he effectively engaged in a utopian exercise whereby those words provided the means to view the world more clearly as he noted in his own words: 'Through words I see.'

Seeing through words permits discerning readers with the means to educate their desire in a sense asserted by Ruth Levitas in her Blochian-inspired construct of utopian desire 'which is simultaneously educative and transformative' (**Levitas, 2011: 123-129**). A careful reading of McGahern's literary corpus leaves little doubt as to the fact that his powerful texts provide much food for thought. His earlier works in particular, such as *The Barracks* and *The Dark,* provided a timely reminder of the suppressed horrors that had been privately gnawing at the Irish psyche. The clear exposition of lived circumstances and experiential trauma in these works and the more collected manner in McGahern's later novels traces the evolving contours of Irish morals and morality and, in so doing, provides a strong impetus for change. What kind of change that was required was itself an evolving question, subject to shifting cultural

values and an evolving cultural terrain on which such conflicts for ideas were to be contested. His stoic artistic persona sustains a consistent critique within his fictive corpora. Indeed, characters in his fictive framework serve as conduits by which a sense of consciousness can develop through and within the reader's mind and subsequently create an imaginative space therein so that this consciousness lends itself to the birth of a process reification of hope. As Ernst Bloch noted in his *The Principle of Hope*:

> *(…) even in anxiety dreams wish-fulfilment still takes place. In the images of fear and hope in the daydream, the faces may often change all the more between fear and hope, between the negative and positive expectant emotion, the most authentic emotion of longing and thus of self, always remains in all of this – hope* (**Bloch, 1996: 75**).

Thus, hope is the most powerful emotion one can find throughout McGahern's work, although it is present in binary forms of extreme strains of anguish and searching anxiety. Arguably, it is through the process of quantifying a character's feelings is the very exercise that renders its form. This permits the reader to qualify their own feelings toward such circumstances of individual experience and creates the conditions for the reification of this hope – that utopian process of longing to look toward and see beyond the horizon in search of better circumstances.

In an essay from the above-named collection McGahern provides the reader with a fascinating insight into his understanding of the writing process. In this respect, he notes, amongst other things, 'I write because I need to write. I write to see. Through words I see.' He goes on to say that 'And words, for me, have always been presences as well as meanings' (**Van der Ziel, 2009: 9**). This discernment is highly instructive for two reasons: it supplies a discernible conviction on the part of the writer for his work; it also bears witness to the belief that the written word exerts a real presence within the mind of the reader. In the case of the latter, this presence is what inspires awareness (however gradual) within the reader of the contours of their own convictions and the attendant emotional element that comes to be understood as a personal view. In the imaginative world of McGahern's creative endeavours, the reader is given a privileged view of the contours of the protagonists' mind, which affords the witness (i.e. the reader in that context) the opportunity to experience a real presence of meaning within their own lives due to the powerful imagery McGahern's talent generated. Indeed, we as readers are in a position to bear witness – at a close proximity due to the richness of the writing – to the experiences of characters as if they were one's own.

Writing in 1991 in a text titled 'The Image', McGahern identifies what can be discerned as writing as a form of art which he asserts is:

> *…an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not long or forever, still a world of imagination over which we can reign, and by reign, I mean to reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable* (**McGahern, 1991: 3**).

The suffering of the protagonists in McGahern's early work in the form *The Barracks* and *The Dark* is indicative of the pain felt by the author of his own life, but which became a powerful source of inspiration for a majestic corpus of committed artistic endeavours. Personal experience, particularly in McGahern's case, thus becomes a constellation of experiences that generates its own blanket of light that illuminates not only topics for treatment by the artist, but the means by which the artist can begin to search for the appropriate linguistic and imaginative tools to give it shape. Thoughts may then give birth to beginnings anew if only to give shape to ancient longings, deep feelings, and old experiences but with a renewed vigour that can allow misty musings to crystallise into images that in turn inspire the formation of words, themselves the building blocks of fictive frameworks.

McGahern's fictive frameworks have left us with an elegant and enduring means by which we can, as he himself remarked, 'celebrate even the totally intolerable'. With the character of Elizabeth Reegan in *The Barracks*, although she is gradually succumbing to terminal cancer, she still finds the peace of place to reflect on the beauty of life as her own life fitfully slips away from her mortal vehicle. Similarly, in *The Dark* the young protagonist Mahoney suffers psychological and sexual abuse at the hands of a tyrannical father, and while he endures great hardship through material poverty in the family home and a lack of affection from his sole parent, hope remains a viable force in his life as he seeks the fulfil the promise of entering the priesthood (seen as a secure life) made to his dying mother. An original joint-incarnation of these two texts was a novel titled *The Beginning and End of Love,* which McGahern wrote in the late 1950s, did not see the light of day. Thus, the author fractioned the work into the two novels referenced above (**Sampson, 2012: 30**).

While memory is a strong governing force in the nature of McGahern's fictive world, it is his imagination that marshals the strands of creativity that dance within his fiction to give life and form to his characters. Such is the power of this exercise that even in the darkest circumstances, an impulse of hope becomes apparent through his writings and demonstrates that even from the most hostile conditions, new horizons can be seen. However, as the experiences of the characters in later novels such as *The*

*Leavetaking* and *The Pornographer* demonstrate, a certain level of hardship must be entertained where one's personal demons and the habits that sustain them must be confronted. One of the sources of these demons within McGahern's fiction and his own personal life was, of course, the Catholic Church, an institution with which he had developed an estrangement by early adulthood. However, this cultural bulwark within McGahern's lifetime casts a long shadow across his fiction and was to remain an object of his fascination despite his disaffection from its practices. While many of his contemporaries retained a durable Catholic habitus (**Inglis, 1987: 65**), the artist himself found himself inexorably drawn toward a life of artistic freedom that was marked by the absence of an acutely confessional dogma.

McGahern's artistic freedom came under direct attack when *The Dark* was targeted by the Censorship of Publications Board. In May 1965, a delivery of a number of copies of *The Dark* was making its way from Britain to Ireland to be sold by a major bookseller when it was seized was customs officers acting under Section 5 of the Censorship of Publications Act 1946. These copies were then swiftly brought before the Censorship board for analysis, and a fully-fledged ban was soon implemented. Liberal national newspaper *The Irish Times* channelled criticism of this development in an editorial which praised McGahern as 'clearly a dedicated writer, not a dilettante, a follower in the manor of Joyce of a high, hard and – whatever the ultimate outcome – unrewarded calling.' The editorial also went on to ask why 'are our own writers the first that we the first we hold up to public disgrace?' and also highlighted the apparent hypocrisy in the official attitude by telling members of the Censorship Board to bear witness to all the graffiti for themselves that could be found in such places. This, the editorial affirmed, was sufficient evidence of the fact that 'everyone finds in life all the smut he wants' (**Nolan, 2011: 262-263**). Allied with the publication and seizing of this book, McGahern had also married in a civil ceremony and thus was not married within the Catholic Church, a personal decision that was anathema to Irish officialdom.

Such was the strength of feeling against him from the governing authorities, McGahern was to see his appointment rescinded within a few weeks and was effectively forced to leave the country (Nolan 2011, 268-269). His time outside Ireland in the 1960s allowed him to regain his artistic initiative, which had been negatively affected by the banning controversy. McGahern's feelings on this rather traumatic episode served as the central plot in his 1974 novel *The Leavetaking*. This novel charts an almost identical set of circumstances of the protagonist to that of McGahern's own experience of having his work banned, his own exile and the relationship and interactions he experienced within his employment – in both cases as a teacher. Denis Sampson (**1993**) expresses the view that *The*

*Leavetaking* provides the imaginative space in which the dilemmas and difficulties faced by the protagonist in *The Dark* are resolved (**Sampson, 1993: 110**).

Debatably, hope is the most powerful emotion one can find throughout McGahern's work, although it is present in binary form with extreme forms of anguish and searching anxiety. It could then be said then it is through the process of quantifying a character's feelings is the very exercise that renders its form. This permits the reader to qualify their own feelings toward such circumstances of individual experience and creates the conditions for the reification of this hope – that utopian process of longing to look toward and see beyond the horizon in search of better circumstances.

While there are a number of targets for improvement in their social lot – one would be hard-pressed to ignore the improving condition of the women' lives in McGahern's world. As the ailing patriarch Moran in *Amongst Women* (**1990**) falters as he completes his terminal journey back to his creator, the Moran sisters inherit their father's authority in Great Meadow once their father reaches that terminus. While the narrator in *Amongst Women* notes: 'Nothing but the years changed in Great Meadow' (**McGahern, 1990: 168**). This is indicative of the static nature of the physical and cultural environment in the Moran family homestead, but it does betray the fact that the Moran siblings have all left the family home and made lives of their own a considerable distance in both time and physical extension from their former homestead. The two sons of the family, Luke and Michael, take no major role in extending ongoing care or taking an interest in the health and fortunes of Moran and his second wife, Rose. It is the daughters who, as mentioned, suddenly acquire the gravitas of authority once their father leaves the mortal world. While the Moran sisters suffered their father's authoritarian dominance, this quality provides them with a certain strength of autonomy beneficial for adulthood, but also demonstrates how they have assimilated the patriarchal values projected by their father after he passes away: 'As they left him under the yew, it was as if each of them in their different ways had become Daddy' (**Ibid: 183**). However, in his last novel, *They May Face the Rising Sun* (**2002**), the cultural environment in which McGahern's characters inhabit has evolved considerably since the publication of *Amongst Women* (**1990**). In the case of the former, the character of Kate Routledge is treated as an equal in stature and capacity by her husband Joe. This is clearly evident from a comment Joe Ruttledge makes in response to a question as to whether he believed his wife was likely to accept a professional situation extended to her when he responds crisply: 'It all depends on Kate' (**McGahern, 2002: 164**).

McGahern's last novel is markedly different to his others because old tensions have receded entirely and have been replaced by a placid sense of belonging as characters live their lives along the lake shore employing gentle manners and discrete strategies to sustain the precious peace that was once seen as just outlandish folly. A sense of peace is evident throughout the novel, particularly in respect of the casting-off of dysfunctional attitudes regarding a fractured sense of heritage triggered by cultural memories of the struggle for independence, abused women and patriarchal oppression, which featured so prominently in early novels. A sense of peace is evident throughout *That They May Face the Rising Sun,* particularly in respect of the casting off of dysfunctional attitudes regarding a fractured sense of heritage triggered by cultural memories of the struggle for independence, abused women and patriarchal oppression, which featured so prominently in early novels. For all intents and purposes, it would seem that the moderate self-criticism that McGahern's fiction fulfilled within the Irish cultural landscape seems to have paid dividends, and a strong sense of hope can be gleaned from the text. McGahern, does not, however, engage in didactical writing. His concern, as he stated many times, was to ensure that 'What is permanent is the spirit or the personality in language, the style, and that's what lasts… I do think that if a person gets his words right that he will reflect many things; but if he sets out deliberately to do it, he'll be writing journalism.' In taking such a stance, he was strongly convinced of the view that, as he noted in his own words (reflecting his avowed admiration for the work of Gustave Flaubert): 'The writer should be like God in nature, present everywhere but nowhere visible'(**Maher, 2011: 30**). Indeed, nature is a central theme that permeates virtually all of McGahern's fiction particularly in *The Barracks* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. In the case of the former, Elizabeth becomes all the more aware of the beauty of the natural world around her as her terminal illness progresses further still in how she wonders: 'the light had slanted, making such violence on the water that she'd to shade her eyes to see the reeds along the shore, the red navigation barrels caught in a swaying blaze at the mouth of the lake and the soft rectangles of the shadow behind' (**McGahern, 1963: 151-2**).

Writing approximately half a century later in his *Memoir*, McGahern again alluded to the fact that we are born from the natural world and it to this that we shall return when we complete our life journey: 'We come from darkness into light and grow in the light until at death we return to that original darkness… We grow into a love of the world, a love that is all the more precious and poignant because the great glory of which we are but a particle is lost almost as soon as it is gathered' (**McGaher, 2005: 36**). In this assertion, McGahern is concerned and continually returned to nature in how he noted the cyclical nature of life and the seasonal character of

changing fortunes as the seasons themselves change through the year. No two seasons are the same, even those that occur during the same period each year, and this provides an abundant source of inspiration for McGahern's searching and imaginative rendering of the human experience.

The self is frequently defined as against a sense of belonging to or alienation from a certain place or area. McGahern's conjuring of the link between identity and place and person and their sense of self can be read in conjunction with Seamus Heaney's *A Sense of Place*, where Heaney observes that: 'I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary, but which are just likely t be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious' (**Heaney, 1980: 131**). *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is constructed almost entirely of a series of dialogues and descriptions of nature. What is conspicuously absent from the text is a stream of consciousness, and there is a scant presence of an interior monologue. However, a strong narrative voice, generally omniscient in nature, is found throughout the text, which displays a tendency toward metaphoric and the proverbial over the discursive. Tact and levity form a central element of interpersonal relations where gentle manners help to ensure relatively friction-free dealings between people in possession of an understanding of the fragile interdependence that exists among them that is precious and must be protected in order to preserve the carefully constructed harmony and tranquillity which is affected through strategies that 'deal in avoidances and obfuscations. Edges were softened, ways found round harsh realities. What was unspoken was often far more important than the words that were said. Confrontation was avoided whenever possible' (**McGahern, 2002: 186**). It is within a generous, empathetic community that it becomes possible to nurture and indeed educate the consciousness and desire of those uncomfortable with their circumstances to imagine alternative ways of life free of guilt-ridden narratives that once supplied the means of implementing cultural sanctions led by hegemonic agents of power within Irish society. In seeking to solidify a sense of place, it is necessary to employ dialogue that sustains the mental imagery that gives that place its form. Thus, those who are sufficiently educated, motivated and aware of new possibilities are those who stand to benefit most from an emerging paradigm shift.

While women were finally recognised as equal in the Irish political system from 1990 onwards with the election of the first female President of Ireland in that year, other marginalised groups only came to be officially embraced from the implementation date of the Same-Sex Marriage Referendum in May 2015 (**Ellkink et al., 2017: 361-381**; **O'Brien, 2015: 292-301**). This followed the wafer-thin approval of the Divorce

Referendum in November 1995 (**James, 1997: 175-226**). Women were then able to seek to have their marriage dissolved in the local Circuit Court and were thus able to escape abusive and controlling husbands. Women were thus empowered to leave unhealthy marriages and pursue their own lives as best they could under their new circumstances. The abortion referenda between 1983 and 2018 also took place under radically different cultural conditions that eventually came to benefit those who supported greater autonomy for women14. In respect of the divorce legislation, it arguably represented a moment when unhappily married women, who had inherited the opportunity to define the dynamics of the future in McGahern's *Amongst Women*, were in a position to finally step outside their husband's shadows and start anew. Not only are women permitted to start anew, they bequeath the next generation of women a tabula rasa in relation to the path and character their own lives could take in the future.

While a new way of life was recognised for women in the 1990s, and with it, the Irish Nation began to mature as it embraced modernity, the times to come were not to be without challenges. Remarkable economic prosperity, particularly from the early 1990s to 2008, satisfied much consumer demand but also fuelled further hunger for social reform (**Murphy, 2014: 132-142**). The artistic class, John McGahern among them, viewed such prosperity with caution and attempted to alert his readership to the phenomenon of endangerment of values that became a strong feature of the Celtic-tiger era Ireland. His reminder of the value and importance and each individual serves as a bulwark against individualism as corrosive property of the modern era. If McGahern's sense of individual presence and how each individual can be seen to reverberate with other people to contribute to a community resonance is to be accepted as valid, and there is little to suggest any doubt in this respect, then one can also assert that his late fiction serves as a swansong for all his work. In that respect, his early work (e. g. *The Barracks*, *The Dark* and *The Leavetaking*) was designed to critique that profoundly dysfunctional nature of the Church-State axis of power in a manner that contained distinct elements of a dystopian narrative. An element of hope emerged internally in *The Barracks*, more explicitly and realistically in *The Dark,* and hope was available but only outside the original jurisdiction in which the protagonist was raised, as in *The Leavetaking*. While *The Pornographer* was somewhat anomalous in comparison to the author's other work, its satirical nature served to demonstrate the artistic freedoms that had been won to allow matters such as sex and pornography to be discussed unfettered in a publicly available work of fiction. *Amongst Women* demonstrated that legacy could shape each individual's character but that while the next generation may be tinged by bitter memories, knowledge of unhealthy

relationships and excessive authority vested in the hands of a small number, or a single individual may well sensitise those who follow to be wary of allowing such practices to go unchallenged in the future. The latter also shows how a new generation can choose to accept their own heritage without allowing it to constrict the foundation of new ways of thinking and new ways of living. Thus, maturation toward autonomy does not necessarily require jettisoning one's heritage to embrace new frontiers.

In many ways, an essential message emanating from McGahern's final work of fiction is that while we can reform or even collapse the power structures that supported dysfunctional cultural practices, we cannot abandon the constellation of communities that have grown within the fabric that formed the basis of these power structures. Ideology can be changed and thinking reformulated, but a timeless quality cannot be forgotten: the social capital that persists between people and forms the lifeblood of the communities that, in turn, form a national system upon which a society can be constructed. It is only through a healthy respect for one's natural environment and one's fellow human being that one can expect to be able to sustain one's ways and provide the means to ensure the survival and prosperity of the generations to come. With the onset of the various manifestations of modernity – mass communications, corporate economics, cultural diffusion and the atomisation of individuals – one cannot forget that to change the world means beginning a conversation with a single person at a time. From the local to the universal, since fundamental values are shared among all peoples, although their expression may vary, their essential nature has remained the same: wonder at the existence of thyself, survival, self-expression and speculation of what lies beyond the mortal world. This is a key element of McGahern's legacy; while cultural values and their expression may change form with different times, the fundamental needs of human beings will always need to be met. To ignore this reality is to imperil our own very existence. A principal source of this danger is a hyper-energetic neo-liberal narrative that corrodes our sense of individual identity and emaciates the tenets of traditional community ties. While proponents argue that this is the only way that people can secure true freedom, any narrative that excludes dearly-held values and involves the hegemonic imposition of one set of ideologies over another cannot claim the mantle of 'tolerance'. McGahern's work provides ample examples of what can happen if such tendencies are left unchecked.

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