OBSERVATIONS ON CHARACTERS' USE OF CONVENTIONAL METAPHORS IN JOHN McGAHERN'S *AMONGST WOMEN*

FIONA MACARTHUR AND CAROLINA P. AMADOR MORENO
Universidad de Extremadura

Few would question the status of John McGahern (Dublin, 1934) as one of the most interesting of contemporary Irish novelists. Proof of this is the amount of critical attention paid to his work. Indeed, he has been classed by at least one critic as "Ireland's most sensitive fiction writer today"[1]. The realistic portrayal of Irish rural life in his first two novels, *The Barracks* (1963) and *The Dark* (1965), established his reputation as a novelist. In this regard, Brown points to the writer's "uncompromising realism"[2], while Sampson insists that "the immediacy of his images of local life" allows a realistic reading and yet McGahern's fiction "exists as a symbolic art in which the concrete image becomes a locus of meaning in an indeterminate world"[3].

Raised in the west of Ireland, McGahern displays a great familiarity with country life, but his apparently obsessive interest with a small, mainly rural world does not imply that his work is of only minor or local concern[4]. Rather it serves as authentic material for the exploration of themes reminiscent of Joyce, particularly religion, politics, sex and society[5]. His protagonists suffer

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[1] See Grattan Freyer, "Change Naturally: The Fiction of O'Flaherty, O'Faoláin, McGahern", in *Éire-Ireland*, vol.18, nº 1 (Spring, 1983), p.142.

[2] See Terence Brown, "Redeeming the Time: The Novels of John McGahern and John Banville", in Acheson, James, ed. *The British and Irish Novel since 1960* (Bucks: Colin Smythe, 1991), p.160.

[3] See Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993), p. 3.

[4] This is stressed by Samspon, *ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.

[5] In this regard, see Julian Gitzen, "Wheels along the Shannon: The Fiction of John McGahern" in *Journal of Irish Literature*, vol. 20, nº 3 (1991), p. 36, or Richard Lloyd, "Memory

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from some kind of frustration, caused by repression in one of these areas, and in this sense the writer is a "social commentator" who meditates on what he sees around him[6], portraying the inner feelings of his characters. McGahern's narrative technique may at times recall that of Joyce[7], and Fournier classes the prose which explores the inner life of McGahern's characters as "some of the most lyrical of our time"[8].

In addition to the "exacting honesty" of McGahern's literary method, the reader is struck by the "intense subjectivity" of his fiction. As Brown further points out, "each of his novels has a protagonist whose private world of feeling is explored with an obsessiveness that reminds us of the traditional Irish short story"[9]. In representing the inner world of these protagonists, McGahern does not rely solely on narrative description or interior monologue. The dialogues in his work also contribute to the depiction of inner states and the relations of the individual to his relevant others. In this sense, the perlocutionary effect of his characters' utterances are often represented directly, arousing answering illocutions or actions from their interlocutors. Similarly, speech patterns, word choice, and other elements of the fictional speech they use are outward evidence of inner states. That is, in realism McGahern finds an "instrument of clinical investigation", as Brown puts it[10].

It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter fully into the question of the extent to which dialogue in a novel may faithfully represent live face-to-face interaction. Suffice it to say that it must possess sufficient similarities with real life conversation to be accepted as credible by the reader[11]. In the case of a writer such as McGahern, who, as has just been seen, is classed as a realist concerned with a faithful representation of the rural life of Ireland, the dialogue may reveal some of those elements of social and personal life on which the author wishes to dwell. This is precisely what this essay looks at, focusing particularly on the figurative language they employ. While consideration of the

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Becoming Imagination: The Novels of John McGahern", in *Journal of Irish Literature,* vol. 18, nº 3 (September, 1989), p. 40.

  [6] See Terence Brown, "Redeeming the Time: The Novels of John McGahern and John Banville", in Acheson, James, *op. cit.,* pp. 160-61, or Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye; The Fiction of John McGahern, op. cit.,* p. 21.

  [7] For a fuller discussion of this point, see K. Schwartz, "John McGahern's Point of View", in *Eire-Ireland,* vol. 19, nº 3 (Fall, 1984), pp. 97-104.

  [8] See Suzanne J. Fournier, "Structure and Theme in John McGahern's *The Pornographer*", in *Eire-Ireland,* vol. 22, nº 1 (Spring, 1987), p. 139.

  [9] See Terence Brown, "Redeeming the Time: The Novels of John McGahern and John Banville", *op. cit.,* p. 160.

  [10] *Ibid.,* p. 162.

  [11] For discussion of this point, see Fiona MacArthur, *The Fictional Dialogue of L.P. Hartley* (Cáceres; Universidad de Extremadura, 1992), pp. 9-14.

author's rendering of specifically dialectal features of speech may reveal much about the geographical setting of the novel, the characters' use of conventional and creative metaphor may act as a window on their thinking.

Amongst Women is the story of an old Republican guerilla fighter, Michael Moran, and his family. It is also, as many reviewers were quick to detect, "a fable about the society created after independence"[12], for which Moran fought. In his old age, Moran continues to fight with his own family, with his friends, with the past[13], trying to fulfil the promises of the independence movement in which he took part. The scene of his current battles is Great Meadow, the family home, a limited territory over which he rules tyranically. The fictional family home is situated in a rural area of the west of Ireland, the Roscommon-Leitrim countryside, a region McGahern knows well from his childhood[14].

One of the main concerns of this novel is change. Some significant events and small transformations that take place in the realm of the Moran family form the essence of the plot. The courtship and marriage of antisocial Moran and a tactful and caring Rose; the departure of Moran's eldest daughter, Maggie, to work as a nurse in London; the preparation of Mona and Sheila's exams; the rebellion of Michael, the youngest of the Morans, and his departure for London, are among the most relevant. Such is Moran's conservatism that he resists the slightest variations in routine. His language, which contributes to establishing this attitude, is pervaded with archaic, pious, and pastoral speech tones (proverbs, invocations to God, and reiterated formulae, such as "who cares, anyway", are distinctive features of his speech). Thus, as Sampson stresses, the rosary, alluded to in the title of the novel, is "not so much an expression of religious faith, as it is a ritual with powerful binding force within his miniature tribe"[15]. Besides, McGahern seeks to imbue Moran's speech with characteristics typical of the dialect spoken in the Irish Midlands, which, among other features, evinces the transfer of certain syntactic patterns of Gaelic to the variety known as Hiberno-English[16]. The author discloses his

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[12] Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern, op. cit.,* p. 215.

[13] Sampson describes the character as "emotionally frozen in time and unable to adapt with any grace to the changes that threaten his vulnerable and authoritarian position", *ibid.,* pp. 217-8.

[14] As Julian Gitzen explains, "he lived for a time in the village of Cootehill and was educated a few miles away in Carrick-on-Shannon at Presentation College. In fiction which is heavily autobiographical, he develops an incremental portrait of this region and its inhabitants, several of whom appear repeatedly in both his novels and short stories". See "Wheels along the Shannon: The Fiction of John McGahern", *op. cit.,* p. 36.

[15] Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern, op. cit.,* p. 219.

[16] Among many other features, McGahern renders typical Hiberno-English structures such as "I suppose he has my name well blackened" (p. 125), "This man and me are after slaughtering

awareness of language as an identifying characteristic in his remark: "One inherits one's place, just as one inherits one's accent, one's language"[17]. Speech and identity, then, are closely related in the novel.

Unlike her husband, Rose is depicted as tender and independent, qualities especially resented by Moran, possibly because they recall his loss of control over Luke, the eldest son. Rose becomes a shelter for the children, encouraging freedom and independence while teaching them to be tactful with their father. Nevertheless, she, like them, is a prisoner of fear, although the patterns of power change in the course of the novel. Towards the end of his life, Moran himself becomes feeble: "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 in London" (p.1). These ambiguous patterns of fear and control affect only Moran and the women; the sons escape his authority. He is, then, a disillusioned hero, believing in a fictional family and ideal home, which he somehow manages to keep together through the ministry of fear.

How Moran's power is conceived and wielded is equally patent in his speech. This is characterised by frequent references to the army, war, and military life in general. "It'd be easier if we met the troops for the first time at the concert" (p. 31) or "That's what I always used to say to the troops" (p. 59), are two eloquent examples, since the speaker is not denoting the men he commanded in the IRA during the struggle for Independence, but rather referring to his family as a unit. The "search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives" is, as Lakoff and Johnson rightly observe, an important element of self-understanding[18]. The way that Moran conceives of himself in relation to others is revealed through the reiterative analogy people = troops, which uncovers an ability to relate to his children only as a group of soldiers, rather than as individuals. He shares with McQuaid a familiarity with military organization and discipline which is transferred to the realm of everyday family and social life in utterances such as "They'd have you in leg-irons" (p. 118) or "Where are the missing soldiers?" (p. 12). In this way, McGahern articulates the mental schema of a character who, despite its distance in time and space, makes ever present a safe, comprehensible world,

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a few trees out there" (p. 47), or "Didn't the hospital say they'd have her met" (p. 50). John McGahern, *Amongst Women*. London: Faber, 1990. All further references to the novel will be to this edition and will be quoted parenthetically in the text.

[17] See Patrick Gordon, "Interview ... John McGahern", *Scrivener. A Literary Magazine*, vol. 5, nº 2 (Summer, 1984), pp. 25-26.

[18] Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), p. 233.

the rules and aims of which constitute a coherent means of experience. The tempo of a soldier's life, marked by the rhythm of a military march, is still heard by Moran who announces his departure with the phrase "It's time for me to beat away" (p. 29) , or echoed in value judgements such as "He was a trumped-up colonel" (p. 15). Indeed, the experience of the army has so pervaded everyday life that expressions such as "Has everything to be drummed in ... ?" (p. 8) conceive the act of comprehension in terms of keeping time to the rhythm set by a military band. This latter instance is only one example of a host of expressions which, as well as being part of the idiolect of Moran or his friend McQuaid, are commonplace in the English language. Any speaker of English may express the concept of a change in attitude as "change his tune" as Moran does on page 124 when referring to his son Michael. Similarly, this character employs expressions which are reminiscent of the Navy when he announces the need for a concerted effort with the arrival of the harvest in the phrase "It'll be all hands on deck from now on" (p. 82) or when he remarks on the fact that the tractor is working well with another naval expression "[it] seems to be going great guns" (p. 164). It is significant that those phrases based on metaphors of army life are uttered in this novel only by the older generation. The use of such expressions helps the author to portray the gap in experience between Moran and his children and offers glimpses into the causes of their mutual lack of understanding. However, while it may be conceded that the routine people = troops analogy called into play by Moran exemplifies a personal metaphor, a seeing-as which acts as a window on a particular ideology, such cannot be the case of the Naval metaphors mentioned earlier. These expressions derive from the practices of the British Navy (absolutely hostile and foreign to the personal experience of the former freedom fighter!) and yet are used with similar ease and automaticity by the same speaker.

As is well known, recent approaches to the study of figurative language have stressed that, far from being an anomaly or proper only to literary or poetic discourse, metaphor is an integral part of human life; it is a rapid vehicle for the expression of thought, and is, furthermore, a common phenomenon in everyday communication[19]. This approach to figurative language treats it as "central to the task of accounting for our perspectives on the world: how we think about things, make sense of reality, and set the problems we later try to solve", as Schön puts it[20]. In this sense, Moran's use of these otherwise un-exciting military metaphors are significant as "symptoms of a particular kind

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[19] See Raymond Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 207.

[20] Donald A Schön, "Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem Setting in Social Policy", in Ortony, A, ed. *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 137.

of SEEING-AS, the 'meta-pherein' or 'carrying over' of frames or perspectives from one domain of experience to another"[21]. His relationship with his family is experienced in the same terms as his association with a group of fighting men as their leader; an inappropriate extension in the eyes of his children. However, while she does not fall back on the people = troops metaphor, even his wife will resort to a similar domain in her advice to Moran to avoid a confrontation with his son Luke: "It's better not to take too strong a stand" (p. 51). Here, Rose employs a conventional metaphor in English, which Lakoff and Johnson represent as the equation ARGUMENT IS WAR[22]. As these linguists have pointed out in their seminal work, an argument can be understood and structured in terms of war, and this understanding is reflected in a host of everyday expressions employed by users of English. These writers stress that it is not simply a case of talking in terms of war, but rather that the speakers themselves conceive arguments in terms of combat —with attack, defense, retreat, and so on, forming the conceptual base of this most common of English metaphors.

The carrying over of schemata from a more concrete domain to a more abstract one may create linguistic expressions which are used by a very restricted group, as in the case of Moran and McQuaid's military domain transfer, or may generate expressions whose metaphorical base is unperceived because they have become commonplace tokens of communication in a whole language community. The conceptual base of such figurative expressions may, indeed, only become apparent to the speakers themselves when it is realized that another language-speaking community does not share the same perceptions which makes such expressions possible. In fact, difficulties in cross-cultural communication may arise because participants in verbal interaction are unable to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of a particular metaphor. Idiomatic expressions very often lead to this kind of problem in communication because the metaphors that underlie them are semantically opaque to those whose cultures may not perceive that the mapping of one domain onto another is possible or sensible. An interesting example of a fossilized phrasal lexeme is used at one point in the novel by Rose's sister when referring to her relationship with the widower: "She'll just become a laughing stock if she's not that already" (p. 26). The same phrase is uttered by one of Moran's daughters later in the novel: "We'll be nothing but a laughing-stock" (p. 103). The meaning of the idiom is evidently clear to the characters in the novel although it is not easily decomposed semantically; the allusion to society's judgements and publicly witnessed shame recall a common practice

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[21] *Ibid.,* p. 137.
[22] See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By, op. cit.,* p. 4.

in the times when an offence was punished by the placing of the offender in the stocks. Obviously, this fixed expression refers to judicial practices which are long obsolescent[23]. That is, it is unlikely that there exists some folk memory of this kind of event, but rather the metaphorical connection that originally gave rise to the expression is lost to all but the etymologist. As linguists frequently suggest, idiomatic language may differ fundamentally from other kinds of linguistic expression because it is learned, as part of the cultural body of information encoded in language, in the same way that other aspects of daily and cultural behaviour are learned in the course of a speaker's interaction with his/her society[24].

Apart from the somewhat alien note struck by this expression from the mouth of a character supposedly born and bred far (in time, space and ideology) from the England alluded to, it is also interesting to note that the idiom refers to the speaker's vision of herself in relation to society. Despite his apparent indifference to the larger world outside Great Meadow, Moran also shows that he is aware of a wider society's rulings. His advice to his daughters when they leave the family home is: "Be careful never to let yourselves or the house down" (p. 82). In a similar vein, he says to them:

> "Life is a peculiar venture. You never know how low or high you'll go. No matter how you rise in the world never look down on another" (p. 61).

In both these utterances, Moran makes use of what Lakoff and Johnson class as an orientational metaphor, where UP implies good social status, and DOWN the opposite. Thus, it is common for speakers of English to talk about achieving a respected social position as "going or moving up the world/the social ladder", "looking up to someone", and conversely, as having undesirable social status as "coming down in the world" or "being at the bottom of the heap". According to Lakoff and Johnson, this conceptual metaphor derives from an association between power and salience, and thus with UP (where UP is MORE/HAPPY/GOOD and so on)[25]. The use of phrases based on this root metaphor implies a shared mapping of the physical to the social domain by speakers of the language. Therefore Moran's command of such expressions

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[23] The stocks were, of course, a kind of cage which imprisoned the legs or arms, allowing the public to jeer or throw objects at the offender in a fully publicised expression of social disapproval. The Oxford English Dictionary records a use of the phrase with its figurative meaning as early as 1533.

[24] However, not all scholars hold that there is a fundamental difference between idiomatic and other kinds of linguistic expression. See Raymond Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding, op. cit.*, pp. 270-318, for a discussion of these contrasting views.

[25] See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By, op. cit.*, pp. 15-21.

suggests an implicit acceptance both of the social values themselves and the schemata which activates such connections. Nor are these isolated instances, for in the novel the same character resorts to the same metaphor on several occasions:

> "What did we get for it? [...] Some of our johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen" (p. 5).

On the same topic, he further says:

> "They say you should have gone to the very top in the army" (p. 5).

The subject matter is different, but Moran's advice to his daughters is couched in the same terms when he tells them to "...hold your heads as high as anybody" (p. 89).

These "sleeping" metaphors help the author to render the conservatism and conventionality of this character through his speech[26]. In the same way, Moran uses idioms based on animal and vegetable metaphors which, for all their conventionality, fit the rustic setting of the novel ("We get too cooped up here" [p. 56] or "You must think money grows on bushes" [p. 94]), as does his friend McQuaid:

> "These girls are blooming. You better have your orchards well-fenced or you'll be out of apples by October" (p. 11).

Rose similarly uses an animal metaphor in her remark: "Well, didn't poor Michael fall on his feet" (p. 103). This particular idiom derives from a well-known feature of the cat —its flexibility. A cat's ability to fall on its feet despite the direction or speed in which it is travelling is associated, in human terms, with extraordinary luck[27]. As Ortony has persuasively argued, the interpretation of a metaphor (its ground) rests not on any similarity between vehicle and tenor, but rather on the salient attributes of the vehicle[28]. Attribute saliency and knowledge representations in general are, of course, built on personal, social, and other experiences. That is, the agility or luck of the cat is a socially agreed attribute encoded in this particular metaphor[29].

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[26] Andrew Goatly distinguishes between the degree of conventionality of "dead" metaphors, which may be "dead", "dead and buried", "sleeping", "tired" or "active". These distinctions are useful, for not all conventional metaphors are inactive to the same extent. See his *The Language of Metaphors* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 31-8.

[27] See Terry and David Freedman, eds. *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Cliché*. Herts: Wordsworth Editions, 1996.

[28] See Andrew Ortony, "Similarity in Similes and Metaphors", in *Metaphor and Thought,* ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), pp. 79-90.

[29] Any contrastive analysis of idiomatic expressions employing animal names or actions in different languages rapidly reveals that the salient attributes of cats, dogs, wolves and so on are

All the characters, in dialogues which render the everyday interaction of people who know each other well, frequently fall back on conventional expressions which convey a commonly held view of life. That is, their speech patterns include some elements of style related to what Bernstein classes as a "restricted code". This code has currency among family members because in shared contexts the possibilities of ambiguity are not high, and this kind of language tends to express a shared "commonsense" knowledge which is an abbreviated or telegraphic mode of expressing shared world views[30].

In the novel, the younger and the older generation alike use a standard metaphor that views life as a journey. So, Moran's categorical "Looking won't get you very far in this world" (p. 65) is called into play to let his son Michael know he disapproves of his behaviour. The same metaphor underlies another of his utterances: "...my life is too short" (p. 176). McQuaid's "this mixture of druids and crooks that we are stuck with" (p. 18) can be classed with one of the girl's remark on her father's attitude while he is sick in bed and giving up hope: "You can't go on like this" (p. 1). In a similar vein, Maggie comments on a trivial domestic upset (the breakage of some plates) with "We'll find some way round it" (p. 10) , and Sean Flynn (Sheila's future husband) uses the same root metaphor when he says to Michael: "You won't get very far" (p. 161). The mapping of physical features of paths or roads onto experiences in life entails that growing older or gaining wealth can be talked of in terms of movement forward, and, just as on a journey from one physical point to another, there may be setbacks and obstacles, so undesired experiences may be seen in the same way (that is, it is possible to "get stuck", or avoid obstacles). Consequently, a coherent entailment of this figure of speech is that a person's attitude or behaviour may be viewed as an obstacle in an otherwise straight journey forward, as when Moran says, on separate occasions, "I want to stand in nobody's way" (p. 87) or "I didn't want to stand in nobody's way" (p. 88)[31].

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culture-specific. Andrew Leach, for example, in his discussion of verbal abuse and the use of animal names, points out that although this particular taboo appears to be universal, the practices that lead to regarding a particular animal as belonging to the indeterminate cases (food/ non-food) vary from culture to culture. See his "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse", in *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. E. Lenneberg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1964), p. 28.

[30] See Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*. Vols. 1-3, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1973; or, for more detailed discussion, Raquiya Hasan, "Code, Register and Social Dialect", *ibid.*, p. 263.

[31] It is interesting to note that McGahern is more consistent in rendering the character's use of institutionalized expressions than he is with representing non-standard syntax: in the second case, Moran uses a pleonastic negative (commonly used in many dialects of English) but in the first he uses the standard form.

Life is not only seen as a solitary journey from one place to another, but also as competitive effort in which success is measured in terms of a race. So, life is equated with steeple-chasing in Sean Flynn's comment about Michael's rebellion against his father: "he fell at the last hurdle" (p. 123). Metaphors related to the world of horses, and more specifically, to horse races, seem very frequent in everyday English. For this reason, it is not strange to find them in the language of a character whose life takes place in an area as influenced by horse races as the Irish Midlands, although they might be used with equal fluency by people from other parts of the English-speaking world.

In contrast to this appeal to the practice of centuries, the modern world intrudes in Moran's confession to Rose: "the mileage is up, you can't turn it back" (p. 59) as a comment on his ageing. The concept man = machine is conjured up here as an analogy of Moran's life with that of a car that has been on the road for a good while. Even in the rural environment of the novel, changes in human transport (from horse to car) find their way into the linguistic code. In the same way, it might be argued that the characters' use of the conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY arises from modern practices of banking, payment of wages according to the hours worked, in a precise measurement of time. So, for example, when Moran says "... whoever has the last laugh in the whole business is going to have to spend a hell of a length of time laughing" (p. 6), the verb "spend" is suggestive. In their discussion of this particular domain transfer, Lakoff and Johnson stress that the way that the concept of work has arisen in modern Western culture (where work is associated with the time it takes and time is precisely quantified) forms the basis of this metaphor. They further point out:

> These practices are relatively new in the history of the human race, and by no means do they exist in all cultures. They have arisen in modern industrialized societies and structure our basic everyday activities in a very profound way[32].

If the correlation between modern, industrialized societies and this particular metaphor is accurate, then its use by the characters in the novel seems incongruous. Although the author portrays a die-hard, traditional countryman, at the same time there are glimpses of the self-deception involved in Moran's refusal to move with the times, or to acknowledge that his life might be affected by the world beyond Great Meadow.

In the light of critical views of the novelist as an "uncompromising realist", the use of metaphors related to modern urban society by characters representing inhabitants of rural Ireland is suggestive. While the daily ex-

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[32] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By, op. cit.*, p. 8.

perience of these characters, closely linked to agriculture, racing or travelling, may be coherent with the metaphors related to these domains ("the girls are blooming", and so on), the same cannot be said for those expressions founded on practices removed in time and space from their daily life. Not only are machines or mortgages significant in this respect; the use of fossilized expressions that rest on associations rooted in the cultural practices of the English ("to have someone in leg-irons", "be the laughing-stock") are equally revealing. The novel, written in English, portrays a former colonial people which, for historical reasons, was obliged to adopt the language of the colonizers; even with Independence, English remains the language of daily communication among most inhabitants of the island. As Anderson has suggested, the rural people of Ireland underwent a kind of exile when at the end of the nineteenth century they were made to learn a standardized vernacular in schools:

> The revival of the native language ... was an inevitable protest against such homogenization, a recognition that to be anglicized was not at all the same thing as to be English[33].

In his "fable about the society created after Independence", McGahern renders some of the very difficulty of an emancipation which was not accompanied, as in the area fictionally represented, by a revival of the native Gaelic. While it may not be wholly true, as Corkery asserts, that "Ireland has not learned to express itself through the medium of the English language"[34], nevertheless the use of many of the fossilized expressions in this novel do much to uphold Kiberd's insight into the aftermath of colonization:

> the effects of cultural dependency remained palpable long after the formal withdrawal of the British military: it was less easy decolonize the mind than the territory[35].

The central character of the novel, Moran, represents the modern nation's dilemma. Having fought for freedom and independence, he nevertheless remains tied to the former colonizers. His speech, and that of his family, reveal an acceptance and belief in cultural mores and practices that on a conscious level he appears to reject. This shows to what extent language, as Lakoff and Johnson, amongst others, have pointed out, constitutes and reflects our patterns of thought. In their discussion of the shortcomings of subjectivist and objectivist positions on language, they point out:

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[33] Benedict Anderson, "Exodus", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20, nº 2 (Winter, 1994), p. 316.
[34] Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork, 1986), p. 12.
[35] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 6.

...understanding, and therefore truth, is necessarily relative to our cultural conceptual systems ... [and] human conceptual systems are metaphorical in nature and involve an imaginative understanding of one kind of thing in terms of another[36].

They view these conceptual systems as creating experiential gestalts, which are founded on ritual cultural practices. The frequent allusions to Catholic liturgy in the language used by Moran reflect one kind of autochthonous experiential gestalt that stands in stark contrast to those represented by customs associated with England and her colonies, and which are reflected in all those idiomatic expressions examined. Although some, like the agricultural or animal metaphors, appear to fit the background of the characters better than others, it is nevertheless the case that these conventional expressions are employed by the inhabitants of large parts of the English-speaking world, and survive as a reminder of the enduring impact of the former colonization.

In this regard, Sampson's critical evaluation of the novel is of interest:

> McGahern is not unaware of the irony that plays over the figures of Moran and McQuaid, both of whom fought a war for national independence and then themselves became domestic tyrants who treat women with contempt and deny them personal independence. But the novel is not a satirical allegory designed to attack nationalism or promote feminism, although it does both: *Amongst Women* is a symbolic prose poem in which many attitudes contribute obliquely to the objective presentation of that unresolved drama of instinctive attitudes towards change itself[37].

Sampson regards McGahern's work as being concerned with the "conundrun of time and eternity" and suggests that although change itself is presented as problematic, nevertheless, at the end of the novel there are hints that the fear and guilt of the immediate family will not be handed on to the forthcoming generations[38]. These vague "indications" are not rendered in any changes in speech patterns; in fact, the girls appear to have inherited the ideology of the British colonial power even more thoroughly than their father. His and McQuaid's speech disclose the only evidence of a leavening of a "given" (in McGahern's terms "inherited") experiential gestalt with a personal schema apparent in some of the metaphors they employ. These two characters have indeed struggled for freedom, but their legacy in this regard has not been accepted by the daughters. Perhaps this very rejection is a consequence of domestic tyranny; a tyranny paradoxically necessary to the achievement of

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[36] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By, op. cit.,* p. 194.
[37] Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern, op. cit.,* p. 220.
[38] *Ibid.*

freedom, but counterproductive in other spheres of life. McGahern's comments on another of his fictional characters may apply equally well here:

> ... somebody who embraces an idea too literally or too passionately is always a danger to society peacefully functioning, is a danger to the natural order of things and to people's comfort. Fascism is rooted in the way intelligent people [...] can get drawn into inhuman ideas. A narrow single thing —a dogma— can be more attractive because it is easier to embrace than actually dealing with the complicated difficult thing that experience is[39].

The dream of an independent nation fired the Easter Rising, a nation that would recover and assert its own identity. The paradoxical nature of this struggle was appreciated and accepted by those involved. McGahern's novel looks at the aftermath, and appears to find that for the sake of "peaceful functioning", it was easier to continue operating with pre-Independence values and patterns of thought. In this sense, although Sampson may be correct in pointing to a future free of fear for the forthcoming generation in the family, no other changes appear to be discernible in the thinking of these characters, insofar as the fictional dialogues allow the reader to glimpse their innermost convictions and feelings.

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[39] Ciaran Carty, "Out of the Dark: An Interview with John McGahern", *Sunday Tribune,* 6th September, 1987.