

Amongst Women Study Guide

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Plot Summary

The tensions in *Amongst Women* are written against the backdrop of a small farm in rural Ireland in a time when patriarchy ruled the family unit. Fortunes were only made away from home and life on the farm was harsh. The home was strict, economically run, and religiously observant.

Throughout the book, the central character, Michael Moran is primarily referred to as either Moran or Daddy. This shows his formal place in the world at large and his place as head of his family. Moran was once an officer and guerilla leader in the battle for Ireland's independence in the 1920s.

Moran has a temper and his voice contains sarcasm, anger, and malice. He tries to explain himself as being misunderstood. He can be physically violent. The children fear his beatings and yet, make much of his niceness when he is in a good mood. Three of his five children leave Ireland for England. The other two find their way in Dublin and visit the family home often.

The story starts with an ailing Moran afraid of his daughters, as they make it their mission to keep him alive. They revive a long, ignored, Great Meadow tradition to try to get him to engage in life again. Monaghan Day was the day of a local fair, but in days passed in Moran's house, it was the day McQuaid, an army buddy, would come to have tea, drink whisky, and reminisce about the war. Although McQuaid had long since died, Moran's daughters thought it would lift his spirits and make him like he once was.

The story then goes back in time to the last visit of McQuaid and his mention of rumors circulating that the widower Moran would marry Rose Brady. From there, it follows the courtship and marriage of Rose to Moran, the family life that she settles into, and the fortunes of Moran's children as they go out into the world and away from his influence.

The relationships between Moran and his children are treated individually, but there is a vast difference between his volatile, physical relationship with his sons, Luke and Michael. He has a more subtle, emotional, and mental influence over his daughters Maggie, Sheila, and Mona.

The story ends with the death of Moran, a mere shadow of his former self, and the acknowledgment of the strength and fortitude of the women in his life.



Section 1 (pages 1 - 8)

Section 1 Summary (pages 1 - 8)

Moran's aging weakness is foreshadowed in the first paragraphs of the story as his daughters attend and badger him to help him feel better. It outlines the planning for the surprise revival of Monaghan Day, a day they remembered had seemed to mean the world to him. Each year, on a local fair day, McQuaid, one of Moran's army buddies would be invited to visit. The girls would nervously prepare a special tea. McQuaid would drink whiskey and the two men would relive their heroism and war days.

The three daughters' join forces and visit Great Meadow to recreate the Day. His wife, Rose, is doubtful about the whole idea. As the three daughters' converge on their family home, they come together as one force. It is a force that moves the attention away from their older brother, Luke, as it seemed it would sour the mood of their father.

Moran, at first, minimizes the importance of the day to him. He says that he only invited McQuaid to the house on that day to stop him from drinking himself stupid at the fair. The girls raise some of the stories they had overheard on these days and he responds by speaking to them openly about the horrors of the war. He expressed his bitterness at how an independent Ireland had turned out. He is angry that more than half his children have left Ireland to work and live in England. Before he retires, he tells them that it was the best part of their lives. He states that it was never so simple and clear, and that neither he, nor McQuaid, had been able to get used to it.

After the ritual of saying the Rosary, Moran retires for bed after the rosary is said. Rose and the girls stay up in an easy camaraderie. The first they knew of him being up in the morning was when a shotgun blast sounded from the front room. He had shot a bird that had been annoying him for days.

After the girls leave for their homes, word is made of Rose and her sister having sneaked a brown Franciscan habit into the house. The habit is hidden in a part of the wardrobe that Moran never opened.

Section 1 Analysis (pages 1 - 8)

The start of this story foreshadows a change of powers. Moran is weakened, while the females in his life are strengthened. He belittles his own heroism in the war, while admitting he found it all so simple compared to the rest of his life. His protestations that nobody cares are slightly pathetic, but effectively manipulative in securing attention from his daughters. Their panic to somehow stop him from slipping away is also slightly pathetic and manipulative, possibly as an unprepared response to change.

Rose is shown to be completely accepted by the family, but somehow, outside of its influence. While the girls are panicking about Moran's possible death, Moran is behaving somewhat pathetic about it. Rose is quietly preparing for it behind the scenes.



Section 2 (pages 8-22)

Section 2 Summary (pages 8-22)

This section outlines the last true Monaghan Day observance at Great Meadow and the end of the relationship between Moran and McQuaid. His daughters, Mona and Maggie prepare the house and the big meal that Moran would want in order to impress McQuaid. His other daughter, Sheila goes to her bed feigning sickness. Moran was ill-tempered and the girls mimicked him while he was out of earshot. They fear his punishment that would enveloped when Mona accidentally dropped a plate.

McQuaid arrived in the evening after spending the day selling his winter livestock. Moran stayed out of sight until McQuaid was settled in the house and felt his previous excitement for this day turn into resentment of McQuaid. It describes Moran as neither rich nor poor. He has a hatred and fear of poverty and illness.

The two men charm each other. McQuaid compliments the girls and the meal. Moran praises McQuaid's business sense that had allowed him to become prosperous in the cattle business. McQuaid enquires about his missing son, Luke, and the girls become tense. Moran reluctantly tells him they don't know where he is, but he has left the house on bad terms.

When Moran asks about McQuaid's family, we are given an insight to the normal, vulgar language McQuaid uses in his relationship with his wife. It is termed as so persistent that it had become no more than a private language of love.

The relationship between Moran and McQuaid is close after the war. Moran even lends his comrade money to him. With the money, McQuaid has become successful and quite affluent, even though he had little education. McQuaid chastises Moran for not applying for the pension he was entitled to after fighting in the war. Talk turns to reliving their famous battle successes, until McQuaid once again, steps into sacred territory by discussing Moran's attractiveness to women and the attractiveness of his daughters. It leads to mention of rumors that Moran has been courting again.

As the talk continues, the two men are quietly at odds and McQuaid lies that he has to leave early instead of staying the night as he usually did. As McQuaid drives away, Moran knows he has lost his oldest and best friend. He begins to think that his family matters more, but they, too, were slipping away from him. He realizes he will marry Rose Brady and already resents the idea.

Section 2 Analysis (pages 8-22)

This section highlights Moran's best and longest friendship. It is full of undertones of bitterness and resentment on both sides. The only things they have in common are the battles they fought together in the war. Even on these topics, they can't agree about the



details or how important their efforts were to achieve their aims. Their conversation is for the most part, polite and friendly. It is enough on the surface, but their underlying difference in values is revealed in their thoughts about each other.

McQuaid goes on to be more successful than Moran after the war and Moran resents him for this. McQuaid drives a Mercedes, which is a symbol of status. To Moran, these wasteful displays of money are vulgar and only for show. They only annoy him. Moran justifies his resentment with thoughts that McQuaid may have been more successful in the wider community, but his manners were uncouth and his devotion to his family made him less worthy in Moran's eyes.

The resentment is most evident when McQuaid turns the conversation to Moran's oldest son, Luke. It annoys Moran that he has to tell McQuaid that Luke has left the family home and they don't know where he is. Moran does not seem to realize that this actually defeats his sense of superiority over McQuaid.

McQuaid finds Moran's need to be right all the time overbearing and for the first time, he is unwilling to put up with it to enjoy Moran's hospitality and company. As he leaves, he says the following, loud enough to be heard: 'Some people can not bear to come in second'. This is the only time McQuaid acknowledges Moran's resentment. It is acknowledged by Moran as an end of the friendship.

The two men had been so outwardly polite and friendly that the girls hovering in the background remember this as when their father was strong and healthy. It was a time when they still feared him and he was still in control. It was this persona they were seeking to draw out of the frail man he had become.



Section 3 (pages 22-45)

Section 3 Summary (pages 22-45)

The reader is introduced to Rose Brady and her relationship with Moran. She had left a domestic position in Glasgow, Scotland, to return to her family and help nurse her dying father. She visited the post office one evening and found a group of people all waiting for the evening mail. Michael Moran, Sr., was among them. She knew of him, hearing 'dark mutterings' about him, as a widower raising his children. She found him intelligent and attentive until the mail was being sorted and his attention turned to each letter being handled.

Rose decided to make a habit of joining the evening mail group and making conversation with Moran. The locals soon noticed and began to gossip about her making a fool of herself for love. Moran raises the possibility of introducing another woman into the household with Maggie. She is left thinking that he would do whatever he wishes anyway. Rose had stopped going to the post office, deeming that if he wanted to see her, he would come to her. Finally, Moran calls her house and her mother in particular, thinks she is making a big mistake.

The children meet Rose and visit her often at her house. The children all take to her and become a part of each other's families. Moran asks her to marry him and quibbles about paying for a reception. Their wedding is all business and for Moran, it is frustration. They have their reception in Rose's family home and her mother disapproves her choice of husband.

Section 3 Analysis (pages 22-45)

The joining of Rose Brady to Moran's family is both a compromise and a blessing for the children. Rose had many suitors when she was younger, but none were around any more. Moran feared growing old and alone, as he saw his children grow.

Rose's kindness and generosity is in stark a contrast to Moran's meanness with money and affection. You are left feeling grateful to Rose for coming into the children's lives, but wonder at what cost to herself. She has been attached to a family in Scotland. Possibly, this was a way to have a family of her own. The absence of Moran's oldest son, Luke still hangs over the family.



Section 4 (pages 45-91)

Section 4 Summary (pages 45-91)

Rose quickly adds a warmth to Great Meadow. Young Michael has gained a room and a bed of his own so that Rose could share a room with Moran. The girls have an older woman to whom they confide and protect from Moran's wrath. Moran has a wife to take care of him and his household. Rose, however, does not seek to rule it. Rose becomes involved in the nightly ritual of the Rosary.

Maggie's place in the household is all but replaced by Rose. Rose advocates for her to be allowed to go to England to train as a nurse. Rose learns that Luke has fought with Moran over this very issue. When Maggie yields to Moran, Luke leaves without her and without telling his father he is leaving. Rose helps her apply for positions and Moran takes notice when she is accepted by five of them.

Moran writes to Luke asking him to meet Maggie when she arrives in London. He is furious when Luke replies with a telegram. When Rose tries to talk to him, she sees the force of his fury and realizes that the children slip out of a room when he is angry. This had been the norm before she came. He returns from his work and she tries to fill the house with chatter, but it only angered more by him. She leaves the room and he vents his anger on her yet again. Her absence, even through the Rosary, concerns Moran. The next morning, he grudgingly apologizes and suggests they go away for the day.

Having won her freedom from the household chores, Maggie takes to going out at night to dances. She leaves London as a freer and confident young woman. Young Michael takes to tending to a flower garden that Rose started when she arrived. Moran is both amused and irritated by it and mentioned that Michael would soon be getting a skirt.

Maggie writes from London and is annoyed that Moran does not mention enough about what Luke is doing. She writes back that he is studying accountancy and is planning to buy old houses and convert them into flats for sale.

Moran got testy about Rose visiting her family and swapping their spare produce. He is most threatened with her going out and makes mention to the girls that they could do without her. He becomes petty and abusive towards her. She plays it down by making excuses for him. He takes it too far when he tells her they have managed well enough before she came. She slowly and deliberately finishes what she is doing and leaves the room. She closes the bedroom door behind her and goes to bed.

Again, Moran expects her to join them in the Rosary, but she does not. When he joins her for bed, she tells him she would have to go away from there. He does make apologies and takes back his words. He tries to say they were light-hearted and not meant to be taken seriously. The children are surprised to find out it was Moran, not Rose who was out of sorts the next day.



The girls are busy studying for their final exams, while Moran spreads lime across the fields. He makes them take their books outside to study and they fear his response when they come back early. Maggie returns from London for a holiday and Moran feels left out of the excitement and is bored. He brings them back to him with the ritual of the Rosary, with him at the head. He softens again and then discreetly rises until he finally asks Maggie about Luke. He brings them together to mow and gather the hay. This is backbreaking work that they all pitched in to finish before the weather turned on them.

Maggie leaves for London, while Mona and Sheila are still awaiting their exam results. Mona had done well, while Sheila had done brilliantly. Moran tells the ladies in the post office it was nothing, as the girls had nothing better to do than study. He explains to Rose that if he did not run them down, nobody else would.

Both girls were offered jobs in government departments in Dublin, but a nun-pressed Sheila, goes to a university, where she has won scholarships. Sheila yearns to study medicine, but Moran withdraws all support and tells her he considers all of his family equals and wouldn't want one to try outbalance another.

The girls leave for Dublin and Moran calls his remaining family to the ritual of the Rosary. Michael starts to sob at the loss and Moran tells him it was time for him to grow up. Moran feels his own loss.

Section 4 Analysis (pages 45-91)

The battles for acceptance, independence, and respect hang heavy in this section. Rose makes her stand, the girls all leave for independent lives, and Moran faces a future with a dwindling family and lavish attention towards him. He is confused by Rose's stand, torn by Sheila's ambition, and only happy when he brings them together for the Rosary, where he is sure of his place as head of the family. With the girls gone and Luke not interested in rekindling any relationship with him, he is already starting to become morose. Rose rises in strength through compassion and appears undeniably stronger than Moran.



Section 5 pages (91 – 124)

Section 5 Summary pages (91 - 124)

Michael is lost without the girls around the house. At 15, he discovers that he is attracted to older women and goes out at night to dances where he can drink and come home late. Moran waits up for him one night and strikes him around the head for his tardiness and his drinking. Mona and Sheila come for the weekend and bring a much needed distraction.

Maggie returns from London, while Mona and Sheila return from Dublin for the Christmas holiday. Moran is back in full spirits and the rituals of Christmas and the Rosary fill the house with joy. Moran raises the topic of Luke with Maggie and she tells him he is doing well with his business.

The three girls and Michael attend the St. Stephen's Day dance. The girls are shocked when Michael takes a glass of stout, as none of them drank and still thought of him as their little brother. They saw him flirting with Nell Morahan, an older girl, with a promiscuous reputation. She lived in New York and earned more waitressing in a week than she could have in a year if she had stayed in Ireland.

After the girls leave and school resumes, Michael spends time with Nell instead of tending to his schooling. They drive around the countryside and made love in the sand dunes. Tensions arise between Moran and Michael, with Rose placating both sides to keep the peace. Nell was happy to have a holiday romance, but worried that Michael was jeopardizing his future by quitting school early.

Brother Michael from the school calls Moran to ask about Michael. Moran finds out about Nell and Michael's affair and confronts him on his return home. Moran's thoughts are to punish the boy and tells him to go to his room and take off his clothes for a beating. Michael avoids Moran's lunge towards him and escapes from the house. Moran threatens to take him within one inch of his life on his return.

Michael runs to Nell's house to borrow fare for a train ticket to Dublin to find his sisters. He is reminded of how Moran had made Luke take off his clothes for a beating. Michael finds his way to his sisters in Dublin. Sheila returns to Great Meadow to negotiate Michael's return. Moran thinks the family would supervise a beating that he would administer, but Sheila told him Michael would not return to that. She returns to Dublin and she and Mona bring Michael back for the weekend. The girls have convinced him to return to school, that is if he did his best. If it didn't work out, they would help him get to London with Luke and Maggie. Sheila's boyfriend, Sean Flynn had driven them all to Great Meadow and was introduced to Moran and seemed to win his approval.

Nell has returned to America and Michael finds it hard to settle back to school. The air at Great Meadow was thick with the tension between him and his father. A fight erupts over



Michael pushing the salt shaker at Moran instead of passing it across the table. Eventually, it was Michael who has the upper hand and Rose rushed to Moran's aid. Moran eyes the shotgun as he says he was far from finished with the boy. Michael watches the gun all evening, ready to pounce on it if Moran moved. He went through the motions of the evening, including the ritual of the Rosary, knowing that he would be leaving as soon as the way was clear.

Rose told Michael the next morning that all he would have to do was apologize and to appear to give in to Moran. Michael leaves for school, but continues to Dublin. The girls put him on a boat to London where Maggie would meet him. Sheila notes that they were all gone from home now.

Section 5 Analysis (91 - 124)

When the girls all leave home, Michael is told he will have to grow up and that's exactly what he does. At 15, he grows up far more quickly than he should have. That was not the way Moran would have liked, following the path of his older son, Luke. Michael runs away from Moran's violence. He runs to the girls in Dublin. Moran's children are close, but they are often in conflict with him. His heavy-handed will to have them all bow to him loses him, which he treasures most. Rose tries again to placate Moran's temper, but is unsuccessful. In the midst of conflict between Moran and Michael, the ritual of the Rosary is Moran's anchor.



Section 6 (pages 124-168)

Section 6 Summary (pages 124-168)

At the same time Michael's boat is sailing away from Ireland, Moran and Rose are ready to say the Rosary and have conceded that Michael would not be joining them. They think he is with Sheila and Mona in Dublin. The girls send a note telling them he had gone to London and that they would be down for the weekend. Sheila questions Moran about Michael being afraid of the gun. Moran becomes defensive, saying he knew he'd be blamed. He turns out to be charming and good-natured during their stay, instead of in the black mood they had expected.

Visits from the girls' become the center of Rose and Moran's life. Sheila and Mona come every other weekend and Maggie comes over from London twice a year. Rose watches Moran lose his spark for life. Moran feels betrayed at how fast the years have gone.

Rose gets information from the girls about Michael and Luke, but more so, Michael, as she misses him dearly. He was trying his hand at a variety of jobs and always had girlfriends on his arm. She would pass on the news to Moran after the girls had left. She learned that Moran couldn't get enough of hearing about Luke. He had qualified as an accountant and had started buying old houses and selling them after converting them into flats. He had an English girlfriend. Maggie had asked Luke to come home, but he'd replied that only women could live with Moran.

Maggie had secretly become engaged to Mark O'Donoghue, a construction worker in London. She brought him home at Easter. His Elvis hairdo, drainpipe trousers, and black, suede shoes were the height of fashion. Mona and Sheila were shocked at his appearance and worried what Moran would say something. Maggie was in love and only wanted everyone to see him as she did.

When Mark's manliness encroached on Moran's ease, he quickly took to organizing the saying of the Rosary. On bended knees with Moran's voice loud and commanding, he once again took head position. Afterwards, he questioned Mark with 'heavy authority'.

Mark escaped to the pub every night and borrowed Moran's car to get there. He invited Rose and Moran to come with them, but the proposition seemed ludicrous to Moran. When they returned home, Mark's voice was loud and Maggie urged him to be quieter. Moran told Rose that would be their life, but if it suited Maggie, it would suit him. He told Maggie the same when she told him they were thinking of getting married. In the week after his lukewarm approval, an ecstatic welcome came to her mind. As the train left with Mark and Maggie on it, Mark said he felt like he'd just gotten out of jail.

Mark and Maggie married in July in London. Moran and Rose did not attend, but did send a check to cover the reception. Mona was a bridesmaid and Luke stood in for Moran.



Maggie asks Luke to visit Moran, but he refuses, saying he hadn't chosen his father. He furthermore said that if had been given a choice, he would have refused. The girls were angry with Luke and found it unacceptable. They believed they were all one and together, they could take on the world. They sent Michael to ask Luke again, and again he refused, saying Moran was a lunatic and he had no intention of ever going home.

Maggie had a son that summer and they took him to Great Meadow a month later. Moran showed no interest in the boy. He took more interest in Mark and he told Maggie he had come to appreciate him. Mark told him about their conversation with Luke and said it wasn't natural for him not to visit his family. After the visit, Moran began to spend a lot of time in bed, lethargy rather than illness. Sheila and Mona came down every weekend and spent much of their time talking to Rose. They noticed Moran, no longer seeming to have any interest in life.

That winter, Sheila announced her engagement to Sean Flynn. She didn't come home as often. Mona came every weekend, as if it were to make up for Sheila's absence. Sheila had wanted a white wedding at her home church, but Moran refused. They agreed on a small wedding in Dublin. Sheila invited Luke, without consulting anybody. Sean and Sheila had bought a small house and furnished it before their wedding. Rose congratulated her, while Moran told her he hoped she would be happy. She could have as much of everything, but it would be useless if they weren't happy. Sheila told them she had invited Luke. Rose was concerned and Moran said he wouldn't want any family member to be excluded from any family gathering, but he was far from joyous.

Luke promised Maggie that he would be invisible. He would not exist, so as not to take the attention away from Sheila. Sheila, Mona, Rose and Moran arrived together and Luke was at the church to greet Sheila. He kissed Sheila and Mona and shook Rose and Moran's hands. Moran darkly told him he was glad he got there and Luke replied that he was glad to be there. At the reception, Moran made a long speech about the importance of family. After the reception, Luke approached Moran and thanked him. Moran took it as an insult that any of his family would have to thank him for a meal. Moran asked if he was traveling further after all these years, meaning to Great Meadow, where Michael and Maggie were taking a two-week holiday. Luke told him he was returning to London, but if they were ever there, it would be a pleasure to see them. Moran told him he would not be in London.

On the long journey home, Moran, Rose, Maggie and Michael talked of Sheila's new in-laws. Moran decided to say the Rosary in the car to save them from saying it when they got home. Michael tried to nudge Maggie into laughing during her recital of her Decade, but she elbowed him back.

Sheila and Sean honeymooned in Majorca for a week and came back to Great Meadow for the second week to be with the others. Moran mostly ignored Michael and concentrated on Sean. He became angry when Sean said his civil service position was 'just a job'. Moran told him he had some growing up to do and he expected more maturity than that from members of his family. Sheila was insulted by the attack and thought that Luke was right when he'd said Moran had the manners of a dog. Sheila



took it up with Moran asking if he had come to start cutting his visitors down to size. He told her Sean was a member of the family now and would get treated like everybody else. He despised Sean all the more for running to a woman with his complaint.

Moran was angry and went out to cut the fields. Rose and Maggie came out with sandwiches for him. Rose said two, young hares, which had escaped the blades were lucky and that Moran hated to kill them. They came across a hen pheasant still sitting on her nest. She didn't fly away and they realized that her legs had been cut from under her, as she sat on her eggs. Rose told Moran he had got her and he said he knew, but the hares had got away.

The whole family had to pitch in for the haymaking. Sean and Sheila were not a lot of help and angered Moran. A neighbor came to congratulate Sean and Sheila and invite them to tea. While he was there, he adjusted Moran's machinery making it better than it had ever been, to Moran's annoyance.

Sheila was determined that she would no longer be bullied. 'She would belong to the family but not on any terms.' She and Sean left the haymakers to return to the house, where the others all knew they would be making love. They returned with tea and she told Moran they were going to tea at the neighbor's. The family was tired and sore from their efforts, but they got all the hay in. Moran praised Michael for his hard work. The rains came and the family scattered back to Dublin and London, leaving Moran and Rose in a very quiet house.

Section 6 Analysis (pages 124-168)

Luke and Michael's independence from Moran came by sailing to London. Maggie and Sheila's came from marrying other men. These men were accepted, if not altogether satisfying to Moran's standards. Michael maintained a relationship with his family, whereas Luke refused to forgive Moran and was on the outs.

Moran's temper was always the source of tension. If he was in a bad mood, they feared him. If he is in a good mood, they feared anything that would affect his mood. They commented on how good it was when he was in a good mood and fell silent when he was not.

Rose placates and soothes him. She pushes things out of the way of his path, as often as she can, so as not to upset him. There is something underlying the emotion when they find the hen pheasant with her legs cut from under her. Rose said, "The poor thing. Still sitting there." A lame duck, a mother cut down. One wonders at the early demise of the children's mother, and Rose, who now sits on the nest and tries to protect the children from Moran, and he from himself.



Section 7 (pages 168-184)

Section 7 Summary (pages 168-184)

Years roll on at Great Meadow. Mona still comes nearly every weekend. It is explained that although she was the most beautiful, she never married. She had casual relationships with older men. As soon as they made demands, they were let go. Moran accepted these men as they never posed any threat to him.

Maggie had a second child and Mark lost his job. He drank away all their money and she returned to nursing. She had come home to Great Meadow with the children, while Mark was supposed to be looking for a better job. She left early feeling the tension. When she left Moran, he said it was right for her to be with her husband.

Sheila came less often than the others, having had three children of her own. She didn't take kindly to Moran criticizing her children and rarely took them, after he shouted that they must have been brought up in a field. They were clever and confident and she did not want them damaged the way she felt she had been.

Michael returned occasionally and Moran left him to his own devices. He had married a Catholic girl, who had become pregnant by him. Ann Smith was a teacher from an English family. The sisters never accepted Ann, but both, Moran and Rose liked her and thought she would be a good influence on Michael.

Moran was aging quickly, taking less care of his appearance and commanding much less respect from the townspeople. He confided to Rose that he had failed with Luke and he felt that Luke felt he had done him some wrong. Rose said that Luke had always taken things too personally. Moran said he would like to see Luke, but he knew he wouldn't come. He decided to write. At least that way, he could forgive Luke for everything and his conscience could be clear.

Moran told Luke in the letter that he had no wish to harm him. When Luke read the letter, he knew Moran must be dying. Then he read it as he would have from a stranger and wrote back saying there was nothing to forgive and asked to be forgiven for any hurt he may have caused.

Maggie asked Luke to go home for the Monaghan Day the girls were planning, but Luke said it was too late for him to go home now. Michael and his family visited in the summer, Maggie came over often from London, Mona came every weekend, and Sheila came whenever she could. Moran suffered a few, small strokes and was slipping away from them. The Monaghan Day was pleasant, but not enough to bring him back to them.

Moran worsened. The girls came home and called Michael to join them. As Moran lay dying, they all gathered around him, except for Michael, who had become bored and took his son to town. Moran demanded, "Why aren't you praying?" They immediately



obeyed. They repeated their prayers continuously until he struggled to speak, saying only 'Shut up!' and he died as they continued their prayers.

The girls vented their anger on Michael for not being there at the end. They stopped the clock at the moment he had died and covered every mirror in traditional respect. Provisions were brought in for the wake. Rose picked the coffin herself and picked the most expensive. They sent Luke a telegram, but he didn't reply. Visitors came to pay their respects and sat vigil at his bedside.

As Moran's body was prepared to be put into the coffin, someone outside started a Decade of the Rosary and others took it up. A cry sounded from within the house. The locals stood guard of honor, as his body was taken to the funeral parlor in readiness for the funeral the next day.

At the funeral, mention was made that the cost of the coffin would have killed him. Rose and the daughters were followed from the gravesite by their husbands, brother and his son. With every step away from the burial plot, the women seemed to gain strength while the men were walking behind them, chatting, and laughing together, as if they were coming from a dance.

Section 7 Analysis (pages 168-184)

The end of Moran's life was dull and long. He was like any other old person reviewing his deeds, but with the expectation that he would be found to have done no wrong.

The girls tried to breathe their energy into his life to keep him as head of their family. Together they were strong, but in part, that was only through his upbringing. The women all needed to be the strong ones in their own families, particularly Maggie, with Mark a drunken husband.

Moran died after finishing his unfinished business with Luke, as Luke paid no respect to him when he did. It was Moran's greatest failing. He had lost Luke and that it hurt him very deeply.



Characters

Michael Moran, Sr.

Moran was no different to many men of his generation and position. His own life had been hard from poverty in his youth and traumatized by war in his early adulthood. The vague reference of fashionable clothing, sets the final leaving of the children around the 1950s. It was a time when all younger generations wanted better than their parents and their parents were at a loss to accommodate them.

Family and home is the center of Moran's universe. This is the one place and group of people he can control and dominate. There is only his family and the world outside of it. As new people come into the family, he tries to dominate them. His sense of family is those who will be obedient to him and think like him and work like him.

His black moodiness creates an insular and inward looking atmosphere around Great Meadow. He rules the family with a strict discipline. He is physically hard-working and expects everyone else to be the same. He thinks little of education, having done well enough to survive without it himself. Security is his greatest value. He craves security in his financial affairs, his children's obedience to him in their jobs, and the jobs of his children's partners.

He can be cutting and violent in his anger. He belittles anyone taking his anger seriously, without realizing how effective it is. His tightness with money was typical of many who had been through the depression and survived not knowing what tomorrow might bring.

He is a man described as thinking only of himself, while he is sure he is doing everything for the good of the family. Rose and the children delight in his moments of happiness. His pessimistic style is what they fear will be his wrath and will be of equal intensity.

He holds everyone's attention as they try to evade an explosion. It always seems so close to the surface, yet only rarely, actually happens. He is a cranky and cantankerous man, which doesn't even occur to him. His violent outbursts are to stamp his authority and prevent any uprising against it. He held his army company in discipline and it worked. He holds his family under the same tight reins, only in part letting go when his children leave his house.

Rose Moran (nee Brady)

Rose Moran came to Great Meadow after years of looking after children in another household and in another country. She loves Moran, his children, and seeks to be the peacemaker wherever possible.



She stamps her own authority by demanding Moran's respect. While he never gives it to her in absolutes, he learns quickly not to exceed her level of endurance. Rose is also kind to the children, who have long been without a mother. She understands their dreams and aspirations. She smoothes the way for them whenever possible and with the exception of Luke, who never came to know her, she is loved by them all.

She is totally accepted within the household and only Moran questions her positive contribution to the family.

Luke Moran

Luke is settled in London and estranged from his father. He happily meets with the other children and obviously adores his sisters. He had been their advocate when at home and bares the brunt of Moran's inability to let go.

He is clever and polite. He is successful and respected. He sees his relationship with his father as all or nothing, but for him to have any of it, would mean to lose himself in Moran.

Maggie Moran

Maggie was 18 at the last real Monaghan Day, just after Luke had left home. She is tall and attractive and compliant to Moran's authority. Her desire to leave home and take up nursing was the catalyst for the final fight between Luke and Moran.

As the oldest daughter in a motherless home, she ran the domestic side until Rose came along to marry Moran. With the arrival of Rose and Maggie's school finished, she speaks again of nursing. This time Rose pleads her case to Moran and she finally leaves for London to study. Moran grudgingly asks Luke to meet her off the train and look after her.

Maggie finishes her nursing training and meets her husband to be, Mark O'Donoghue. Mark is a good-looking, fashionable man, who works in construction in London. He is also a drinker and never far from a pub. After bringing Mark home to Great Meadow for a holiday, she tells Moran she would like to marry Mark and seeks his approval. He tells her if he's good enough for her, it's good enough for him.

Maggie has two children with Mark and brings them home to Great Meadow for an extended stay when Mark loses his job. She was to stay for six months, but cut it to two months when Moran became moody. He felt her place was with her husband. When she returned to London, she found Mark had drunk all of their savings and not found any more employment. She put the children in a day care and went back to work as a nurse to support them. She would never rely on Mark's money again.

Maggie is the most likely to be optimistic about Moran's moods and particularly, after she leaves home, she is apt to see him positively.



Mona Moran

The middle daughter, Mona was 16 at the last real Monaghan Day. She was the most beautiful of the girls. She was bright and outgoing and more likely to clash with Moran than Maggie. She feared him when she made a mistake, but was often protected by Luke or Maggie in her younger years.

She left home with Sheila at the end of their studies. She had studied well and went on to become a civil servant in Dublin. She had many casual relationships, but never married. She would bring men home to Great Meadow for weekends and Moran was gracious to them, as he never felt threatened by them.

She maintained a close relationship with Moran and Rose, visiting them every other weekend and every weekend towards the end of Moran's life. Mona's part in the story is somewhat cloistered. You know she never wants to give her independence away, but she rarely speaks out like her sisters.

Sheila Moran

Sheila pretended to be sick to avoid the preparation for the last real Monaghan Day. At 15, she was self-centered and bright. She scored extremely well in her final exams and won scholarships to study at universities. She wanted to study medicine, but Moran stifled the possibility until she gave up and took a civil service job in Dublin, along with Mona.

Moran told her he didn't want any of his children to think of themselves better than any of the others. She resented it, but she relented.

It is Sheila, who questions Moran about his treatment of Michael, who leaves after being threatened with violence from Moran. She and Mona arrange for Michael to go to London to be with Maggie and Luke.

Sheila married another civil servant, Sean Flynn. They save for a modest house and furniture before they were married. Sean is somewhat of a mother's boy and Sheila becomes the stronger of their household. Moran tries to impress upon him that security is everything to a married man. While Sean remarks that his job is 'just a job', Moran's cutting remarks to Sean get back to Sheila, who confronts Moran for his rudeness.

She becomes less scared and reliant on Moran when he criticizes her three children. She keeps them away from him to protect them. Her children are smart and confident. She doesn't want their possibilities eroded the way she feels she was.

Sheila appears to be a strong, which she acknowledges comes from Moran.



Michael Moran, Jr.

Michael is the youngest boy, mothered by his sisters, and then by Rose, when she joins the family. He is kind to animals and has a good hand in growing flowers in the garden. He is not keen on physical farm work and Moran sees him as pampered and lazy. At one stage, Moran tells him he will need a skirt. When his sisters leave home and he comes more to the attention of Moran, he is told he has to grow up. At 15, he grows up quickly, becoming involved in relationships with older women. He forgets his studies to pursue physical pleasure and drinking.

Rose protects him and even gives him money so he can go to the dances at night. When Moran finds out what he's been doing, he is incensed with rage. He threatens to punish the boy with a beating and tells him to go to his room and undress. Michael refuses and runs away to Dublin to be with his sisters.

They return him to Great Meadow, after negotiating an amnesty with Moran. He returns for a time, but again, incenses Moran and the two physically fight. Michael is younger and stronger than Moran, but fears for his life when Moran starts to eye his rifle in the room. This time, he leaves for Dublin and Sheila and Mona put him on the boat to England.

With his independence asserted, Michael mellows towards his father and returns often for visits. When he's back at Great Meadow, he works harder in the fields than anyone and Moran gives him sincere thanks and compliments.

In London, Michael takes up with an English teacher, Ann Smith. When Ann becomes pregnant, Michael asks Luke for advice as to whether he should marry her. She is catholic and her parents would never agree to them living together, as Luke suggests they do until the baby is born. Michael decides to marry Ann and asks Luke whether he should ask Moran's permission to marry. As far as Luke is concerned, Michael's relationship with Moran is his own business.

Michael marries Ann and they have a son. When Moran's health is failing, Michael returns with his son to Great Meadow. He gets bored with the solemnity and the waiting and goes into town with his son. Moran passes away while Michael is out and the girls take offence.

For all the upheaval of Michael's teenage years, he is still light-hearted and kind. He makes the other men laugh, as they leave his father's funeral.

Jimmy McQuaid

Jimmy McQuaid was under Moran's command in the army. He admired Moran's leadership qualities. Moran respected his courage. The two have a friendship based on shared experiences in the horror and the glory of the war. Every year after the war, the



two men would come together on the local fair day, Monaghan Day, and recapture their heroism and youth.

McQuaid had borrowed money from Moran after the war and become quite wealthy from his business pursuits. He was an uneducated, working class man. He drew the war veteran's pension and drove a Mercedes. His rise in fortunes irritated Moran. Yet, he was the only person Moran could call a friend.

Moran's unwillingness to see anyone else's point and McQuaid holding himself above his station, suggesting that Moran draw the veteran's pension, cut a knife through their friendship. At the last real Monaghan Day, they both realized they had too little in common to really be friends.

Monaghan Day and the coming of McQuaid to talk, dine, and drink whisky in their house, was the only thing the girls knew of their father outside of being their father. It was to this tradition, although McQuaid had long been dead, they sought to return in order to bring their father back to life.

McQuaid spoke flatteringly to Moran of Moran's daughters and their hospitality. He liked Luke and was, in Moran's opinion, too nose-y about another man's family when his own was far from perfect. McQuaid could be uncouth with his own wife and at times Moran held himself up as being exceedingly generous in keeping him out of the pubs on Monaghan Day. It was not a true friendship, but it was the only one Moran, or his children knew him to have.



Objects/Places

Great Meadow

Great Meadow was the small farm in the county of Monaghan that Moran bought at the end of the civil war. He raised his children there on his own after their mother died. He worked the farm for a meager existence. He cultivated the hay with the help of the family.

Civil Service

The civil service employs workers in government department positions. It is a secure position with great stability of employment and steady advancement. The majority of civil service positions are in Dublin.

Republic of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland is approximately 83 percent of Ireland's population. It was separated from Northern Ireland after the Irish Civil War in 1921. It was known as the Irish Free State until 1937, Eire from 1937 to 1949, when it severed its links to the British Commonwealth and became a republic. It is made up of the traditional Irish provinces of Leinster, Munster and Connacht, and three of the nine counties of the province of Ulster, they are Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan. The remainder of Ulster stayed with the British and is now in Northern Ireland.

Dublin

Capital of the Republic of Ireland and the center of Irish political and commercial activity.

London

Capital of England.

Roman Catholics in Ireland

Roman Catholicism is the principal religion in Ireland holding between 93 and 97% of the population.



Saying of the Rosary

The Rosary is a Catholic ritual of prayer said while counting through a string of Rosary beads, or by using your fingers.



Themes

Family

Family is everything to Moran and his daughters. Moran rules his family with an iron will and punishes those who dare go against him. Unlike many patriarchs who give up their daughters to another man's family when they marry, he considers their husbands to have joined his family and will obey him as his own.

Unlike many patriarchs, he seems uninterested in the children of the next generation. His interest is not in continuing his bloodline, but the quality of those within it.

The sisters are close and are described as if they were one person when they are together. They share Moran's sense of family solidarity. Rose is accepted into the family by the daughter's, but Michael's wife, Ann is not.

Luke remains apart from the family and is able to function successfully from outside of it. The others are always trying to bring him back as if he is somehow making them the weaker for his absence.

In their own ways, both Maggie and Sheila become the heads of their respective families. Their husbands seem weaker than themselves. Moran says to Sheila that she is the 'right man for the job' when she seeks to protect her husband Sean from Moran's rudeness. Maggie becomes the breadwinner in her family when her husband, Mark loses his job and drinks away all their money.

Mona refuses to start a family, preferring casual relationships where men do not cramp her. If they do try to take over, they are quickly left.

After Moran's funeral, the women are described as each in their own way having 'become Daddy' while the men, (minus Luke), are described as a crowd of women.

Rituals

At Great Meadow, daily and yearly rituals tell the passing of time. Each night there is the Saying of the Rosary, and yearly, the bringing in of the hay.

Moran uses the ritual of the Rosary to control, appease, offset, preach and preclude the events in the household. When all else fails, his unarguable position in the family calls for the Saying of the Rosary. The family members have a specific order in which to say their verses. An absence or the bringing in of a new member alters the makeup of the ritual, but Moran is always in charge of when and how it is delivered.

Rose stamps her right to respect by twice retiring early to bed and refusing to take part in the ritual, after being belittled by Moran. He tells the children to leave the bedroom



door open so she could join in, as even members sick in bed would do, but she remained quiet and he was forced to apologize to her for his unkindness.

The bringing in of the hay requires the assistance of all the family and brings them together in solidarity. Michael avoids it when he is young, but puts himself into heartily on his returns to Great Meadow from London. Sheila escapes from it while on her honeymoon with Sean. Sean's fingers blister from the physicality of it and it makes him less than Moran would respect. Maggie's husband Mark never even tries to help and yet Maggie, leaves her children with her sister in law, in order to assist the family. Rose joins in, without complaint of the backbreaking work, while Michael's wife is never there for the ritual.

Moran says a family that prays together, stays together and the family all have to pitch in when there is work to be done. These rituals denote the solidarity of the family members involved.

Independence

Moran had been a freedom fighter in Ireland's Civil War. He found that even having won the war, there was much Ireland had lost for their freedom. Many of its population had to go to England or America for work, including three of his own children.

Luke stamped his independence totally when he left Great Meadow after a fight with Moran. He never returned again. He was doing well in London, but the family found his ability to get along without them arrogant and ungrateful.

Michael and the girls won their independence in part. Michael still sought his father's approval, whereas it really didn't matter to Luke. The girls had their own lives', but were never truly independent of Moran until he died. Even then, they said he would never leave them.

Rose has a personal, if not physical independence. She has her own money, which she uses or gives away, if Moran is unprepared to part with his money. She loves Moran, but has an independent streak, threatening to leave when he belittled her worth to the family.



Style

Point of View

John McGahern's *Against Women* is written in the third person with the focus on events affecting Moran and his family. The scope is tight, ignoring everything that had no direct bearing on Moran's interaction with the family. Their world was insular and inward looking, keeping a restraining tightness on the narrative.

The narrator is both honest and balanced in his portrayal of the characters. He is at times, sympathetic to Moran. He shows both his black and his light hearted moods. Moran's inner fears are revealed, as are his harsh exterior. The other characters are shown mostly in their relationship to Moran and the affect that he has on them.

The point of view is able to go into the minds of all of the characters and shows their true feelings against their outward actions or words. It shows their failings as well as their strengths. Their outer words and actions often belie their inner thoughts and feelings, mostly for their own protection or to adhere to polite convention.

Setting

Published in 1990, *Amongst Women* deals with issues of those not too many generations ago. It is set in rural Ireland, predominantly in County Monaghan, with tiny, insular glimpses of Dublin and London.

There is a heavy focus on life within the walls of Great Meadow and even more tightly within the living room. People may go to their bedrooms, Dublin, or London, but it is reported as if from within the tight confines and under the gaze of Moran.

Family members leaving the confines of Great Meadow interact with the outside world only in a very small radius from themselves. Even in London, the characters are cloistered in small pubs or restaurants and the reader does not see past their own actions and company.

Sheila and her husband Sean's house in Dublin is described only from within and from what you would see from its front or back steps. The reader is bound tight to the family and rarely has an opportunity to look outside of it.

Language and Meaning

The language in *Amongst Women* is constrained and at times as bleak as Moran's moods. It is restrained to traditional, reserved, and religiously observant parameters, rarely using profanity.



The tightness and economy of it takes the reader into the house, becoming one of those watchful of Moran's moods. Sentences are often long becoming tortuous to those wanting to get to the point of release. It is fitting because that is the point of the story.

Much of the language is dated in the time of the setting. It uses traditional manners and doesn't slip into regional brogue. It has an Anglicized formality, traditionally suited to more educated characters than it often portrays.

It is as if Moran has raised his speech to his station by listening and learning from others and it portrays a public civility.

Even McQuaid, who is uncouth and foul-mouthed, does not use his normal language in the company of Moran or his daughters, but opts for better manners.

Author John McGahern was well educated and has spent a lot of time away from Ireland. He has obviously taken the international appeal of his work into consideration when choosing the language for this work.

Structure

There are no chapters in *Amongst Women*, only spaced pauses to show the passing of time. Years are rarely mentioned, as if they do not matter to the family, only the events that affect them directly.

Small mention is made of the fashions in London, basing the time Maggie marries Mark in the nineteen fifties or sixties. But at Great Meadow, there appears no need to keep track of anything outside of their world. Moran hates the past and has no need of the future.

The tension is forever building, and only sometimes, allows small explosions of release. The reader cheers small acts of defiance by the characters under Moran's control, but at times empathizes with Moran that he could be any father from that time and circumstance.

The story starts near the end and then reverts to a time just after Luke left the family, before running in a linear style to Moran's death and funeral, which of course is the end.



Quotes

"On the tides of Dublin or London they were hardly more than specks of froth but together they were the aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow, a completed world, Moran's daughters." Section 1, page 2

"He saw with bitter lucidity that he would marry Rose Brady now. As with so many things, no sooner had he taken the idea to himself than he began to resent it passionately."

Section 2, page 22

"They say he's one sort of person when he's out in the open among people - he can be very sweet - but that he's a different sort of person altogether behind the walls of his own house." Section 3, page 24

"Whatever you think, Daddy." She knew that whatever she said would be irrelevant anyway.' Section 3, page 27

"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." Section 3, page 34

'There was only Moran, their beloved father; within his shadow and the walls of his house they felt that they would never die; and each time they came to Great Meadow they grew again into the wholeness of being the unique and separate Morans.' Section 5, pages 93-94

"He'll have to come back," Moran breathed heavily. "And when he does that gentleman will have to be taken within one inch of his life." Section 5, page 112

"Once he made Luke take off all his clothes in the room. We heard the sound of the beating." Section 5, page 113

"No matter how far in talk the sisters ventured, they kept returning, as if to a magnet, to what Daddy would like or dislike, approve of or disapprove of." Section 6, page 131

"In this quiet place where dress was conservative, all violence hidden, Mark appeared like a figure out of a pantomime." Section 6, page 135

"He stumbled over the first lines, with Maggie suffering tortures in case he would be seen to be so unused to prayers as to have forgotten the words; but by the time he got to the Hail Marys he was able to fall back on the repetitive rhythms and Maggie was able to breathe easy again." Section 6, page 136

"Her eyes were shining and alive, a taut stillness over the neck and body, petrified in her instinct." Section 6, page 159



"As the shining ornamented oak coffin was lowered with the ropes, a whisper loud enough to turn heads in the crowd was heard: "That man would have died to see so much money go down with him into the ground." Section 7, page 183



Topics for Discussion

Explain possible reasons why Moran would keep his family so close to himself and his home.

Discuss how parents discipline children. Is it right to inflict a beating? Does it work in making the child behave how you would like?

What other forms of control does Moran employ?

Explain why the 'violence is hidden' and Moran is a 'different person in his own home'.

Discuss Luke. Do you really think he is at peace with his decision to stay away from Moran and the family home?

Why do you think Michael is attractive to older women?

Explain why Moran and McQuaid never found life so easy again.

What is the significance of the hen pheasant having her legs chopped out from under her?

Discuss why you think Mona never married.

Discuss the costs and struggles of independence.