

The dichotomy of the secular and the sacred in Alice McDermott's *After This*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse Alice McDermott's *After This* in the Postsecular perspective. The title of the novel hints a Postsecular critical interpretation of the novel. The novel captures the turmoil of young people caught up in the sexual revolution of the 60s and the aftermath of Vietnam War in America. The end of the innocence of the young people is represented in the Novel.

The division between the sacred and the secular diminishes as the secular image also evokes sacred memory. Post secular Literature offers space for reflection on the significant ways of perceiving the religious/secular binary. The secular ideas of the young people reveals their bias towards religion and the result is they dare to profane the sacred only to realize the resurgence of the religious upbringing in their life.

Keywords: postsecular, sacred, secular, bias, profane, memory, resurgence

Introduction

McDermott's, *After This*, rightly reviewed by Karen L. Arnold "refers to the time "after" the movements away from faith, family, and country that forever altered the world the Keane children inherited and then modified as they grew to adulthood." The novel is set in the backdrop of the war in Vietnam which took its toll in the loss of lives of numerous soldiers. Jacob, the eldest son of the Keanes dies in the war and the resultant hopelessness grips the entire family. The post-traumatic atmosphere is poignantly told through the Keanes as they make attempts to reconcile to his death, the wayward life of the other children comes as a rude shock. The unexpected wind of events threatens John and Mary and they brave it as they have to bear the brunt of the "hurricane after all." (43) Paul T. Corrigan remarks that Charles Taylor and James K. A. Smith both strike a balance between the religious and the secular. They succeed in doing so by not stressing on the differences between what religious and secular people believe but rather on the similarities of their "lived experience." Smith is of the opinion that "religion is an embodied, material, liturgical phenomenon that shapes our desire and imagination before it yields doctrines and beliefs," then we can find it "where we don't usually see it" (161). (Qtd. in Corrigan)

This paper attempts to analyse Alice McDermott's *After This* in the postsecular perspective. The title of the novel hints a postsecular critical interpretation of the novel. The novel *After This* revolves around young people who turn out to be indifferent and nonchalant as they desire to live life in their own terms belying the trust of the parents. The novel captures the turmoil of young people caught up in the sexual revolution of the 60s and the aftermath of Vietnam War in America. Corrigan who emphatically states that, "secularization has not panned out the way many expected it to. In spite of industrialization, globalization, science, and pluralism, the world remains religious. On the other hand, *the way in*

which the world is religious has certainly changed. While the secular and its attendant phenomena have not displaced religion, they have certainly shaken it up." Dr. Corrigan supervises the Dialogue on Teaching Excellence and helps to lead the Faith Integration Seminar at Southeastern, facilitating in-depth conversations on faith and learning among faculty. He states that Postsecular Literature, "responds to the surprising persistence, resurgence, and/or reenvisioning of the sacred, the spiritual, and/or the religious within societies, individuals, and/or works of art..."

St. Gabriel's church in Long Island was leaking and before it could be dismantled the School children were taken inside the church for the farewell prayer and Fr. Hecht tells them, "The old makes way for the new" (104). The naiveté of the children can be noticed in their simple belief for, "[a] rumor spread among the younger ones, Clare Keane included, that the unused staircase at the back of the church, with its wide marble banister and its velvet rope (and its scent, when you get near it, of incense and attics), was an entrance to heaven" (*After This* 103). Later the narrator makes a note that those who shared in the above belief also "considered that some sort of holiness lingered everywhere" (*After This* 105). The end of the innocence of the younger Keanes is denoted at the end of the chapter. The following lines mark the transition, "[i]n only a matter of months, Michael learned that the cheap foam cushions of the Danish modern sofa will buckle on you when you press a girl too ardently into its frame" (*After This* 106).

Tony Persichetti gets a hand on religious experience in an ashram and spends few months with the Krishna Group. Susan alludes to his homecoming as the prodigal's return to the biblical repentant son in the parable of Jesus. Tony transforms his life from being an Alcoholic after attending Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. "And with God's help and theirs, he would get his life together at long last" (*After This* 251). Toni with a renewed zest for life begins his day with Holy Mass, starts to work, takes classes and pursues his masters in social

work and dates a schoolmate. He professes that it was easier for him “to pick up an old faith than talk yourself into a new one” (*After This* 251). The characters of the twenty-first century American novels and their sudden religious turn corroborates McClure’s “Partial faith” “whose initial rejection of religion is replaced by tentative gestures of “partial faith” and to the narrative of Western fiction (and culture) in general: following the Enlightenment negation of the religious, postmodernity continues the romantic project of welcoming religion’s transformed, non-hegemonic (re)incarnations.” (Maczynska 75).

Corrigan reviews Taylor’s ideas about the moral/spiritual life of the secular and the religious in *A Secular Age*:

We understand ourselves living in relation to some source of profound “fullness” which we cannot fully attain, for which reason we also experience profound “emptiness” until we can come to “a kind of stabilized middle condition” wherein we aim to live “well” and aspire “beyond” where we are presently. The difference between believers and unbelievers is simply their understanding of where the source of fullness, goodness, human flourishing resides, whether “within” or in some transcendent reality.

Jacob realizes his craving for more as he drives the car he wanted to possess and the solution for the puzzle he had learnt in the religion classes to the question – why the rich were so ungenerous and why the suffering of the poor could not be fixed, as it is the desire for more, the craving – “I want” (*After This* 110). Michael is rather skeptical about the new Church for he feels that it is a waste of money just as Judas in the bible was indignant that the perfume that was used to anoint the feet of Jesus could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Michael profanes the sacred when he says “I think the new church is bullshit” (113). Jacob tells him that the people need a place to go Michael repeats that it is bullshit. The young people adhere to their parents’ religion initially then they begin to question. Michael regrets for the money he has lost in complying with his parents request to go for the first Mass in the new church than caddying which makes clear that craving for materialistic prosperity takes precedence over the transcendental prospects. Corrigan believes “[w]hen we focus not on what people think but on how people live their lives—their experiences, longings, impulses, habits, etc.—the lines between religious and secular seem a lot more blurry.”

The division between the sacred and the secular diminishes in the image of Lady Godiva portrayed as Mother of mercy. In the prayer *Salve Regina* of Mary, mother of Jesus is hailed as mother of mercy. The secular image evokes the sacred memory. Caroline in Ralph’s bar exhibits her body and is avowed as ‘Lady Godiva’, the legendary woman who dared to ride naked at her husband’s rebuttal to reduce the taxes and so Chris adds a subtitle to her name as mother of mercy. Michael himself a peeping Tom dubs the other peeping Toms in the bar he as seraphim and cherubim surrounding a Madonna:

Given the sexual tension that the appearance of Tom creates between the observer and the observed, the prurient and the chaste, the punished and the rewarded, Donoghue writes, “Their pairing anticipates Sigmund Freud’s clinical definitions of scopophilia and exhibitionism in terms of one another so well that he almost seems to have Peeping Tom in mind for the former and Lady Godiva for the latter. Only in recent years has Peeping Tom become extricated from the Godiva legend to the

extent that it is possible to mention one without calling to mind the other. (Coe)

Post secular Literature “offers readers opportunities for reflecting on and spaces for practicing important and beneficial ways of seeing and being that have traditionally been closed off by the religious/secular binary...” (Corrigan). McDermott in the detailed chapter on the Halloween fun at Damiens describes at length Michael’s experience and then ends it on a note of revelation he attains after the drunken stupor and sex with Beverley. As he was leaving Damiens Chris wishes him “Vaya Con Dios” meaning go with God. The embedded religious training of the young is vividly captured in Chris’s habitual greeting. Beverley’s sketches on the wall as understood by Michael is an illustration of all that one desires in life. He could see through those pictures all that she aimed in life which were ironically both pretty and crude; a cartoon and a vision; satyrs and nymphs; cherubim and seraphim and a vision that need not be taken serious at the same time Michael perceives it as a precise illustration of everything one wanted in life. Simultaneously he recalls to mind the prayer *Salve Regina* and he wonders how “even after you’d entangled yourself from everything else, the words stayed with you” (184). Michael perceives the pictures on the wall that could be brushed aside as a joke or the prayer as a summation of the desires.

Susan Persichetti at the age of thirteen undergoes abortion without her parents’ knowledge. After the abortion she recalls to mind the prayer of Contrition, ““Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee’, more a habit of mind than a plea for absolution” (156). She feels a sense of relief more than remorse. Maczynska in her analysis of Zadie Smith’s *The Autograph Man* defines the Postsecular texts “as narratives that openly question or destabilize the religious/secular dichotomy on the mimetic, formal, or metafictional levels by juxtaposing religious and secular discourses within the economy of the fictional construct.” (78) This scholarly characterization is applicable to McDermott’s *After This* as the novel blends with the scholarship on postsecular study as it engages the readers to differentiate between the secular and the religious.

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