

The representation of  
catholicism in brian  
moore's the lonely  
passion of judith h...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Brian Moore's novel was first published in 1955, first titled as *Judith Hearne*, after it had been denied by ten American publishers. They felt like "it was too depressing, and the woman was not attractive, and she was religious" (Hartill 136). Despite its reluctant initial welcome, the novel became extremely popular with its audience since they could identify with its unusual heroine. The story follows the protagonist, Judith Hearne's journey, who tries to follow the strict rules of Catholicism while being a single, middle-aged woman. In addition, she has to struggle with alcoholism, which ruins her reputation, and she has to confront the fragility of her faith. The story is set in Belfast, following the end of the Second World War, in the 1950s. In the following, I explore the Catholic faith's pressure on society and the lack of genuine belief in the mainly Protestant Northern Ireland through *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*.

To have a better understanding of the novel and the circumstances of its creation, it is essential to be aware of the author, Brian Moore's view of Catholicism and Ireland in general. All of his family were Catholics, except his grandfather, who was originally Protestant. His father was the chief surgeon in Belfast's biggest Catholic hospital, while his mother came from Donegal, from the Republic (Hartill 134). His childhood in Belfast in the 1920s and 1930s was not easy, the Great Depression left the city with poverty, unemployment, strict religion and class hatred (Hartill 131). He attended a Roman Catholic secondary school, which he used to call a "priest factory" (Hartill 131). Since the school was in a predominantly Protestant area, it was really important that their students performed better than the Protestant pupils. To achieve the required results, the children were constantly caned

and beaten. Moore still remembers this treatment with anger, and says that they “ weren’t really taught anything” (Hartill 132). When asked about the religious side of the school, he said that there are people who are simply naturally not religious, and he is one of them. He was in a state of ‘ sin’ when he made his first communion, since he could not possibly tell his sins to a priest (Hartill 132). This made him question religion at a young age and when he started “ fudging it in confession and [he] was told it was a mortal sin” he decided it was a lot of nonsense (Hartill 132). It is not surprising that many people are somewhat shocked when they learn that he is a ‘ Catholic’ writer (Hartill 132). According to Jo O’Donoghue, the biggest difference between Moore and other ‘ Catholic’ writers is that his focus is on Catholic society rather than spirituality (O’Donoghue 12). What is more, he also lacked two fundamental elements that are typical of these writers: “ a very skeptical attitude towards free will” and “ a sense of inevitability of sin” (O’Donoghue 12). In his very first novel, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, which he wrote “ after years of struggle”, he expressed his “ personal bitterness” towards Northern Ireland and Catholicism, and as Jo O’Donoghue says, he used this bitterness as a means of making a political statement (Kiberd 583; O’Donoghue 4).

Being a part of the Catholic minority in Belfast had its toils on its members. Being the world’s fifth largest industrial cities, Belfast was the centre of the industrial north, which meant it was strongly tied to Britain (Cleary 86; 87). The fact that the population’s great majority were Protestants meant that the hostility to Catholicism was quite severe. For this reason it was hard for Catholics to separate their political lives from their religious and the

oppression only increased with the institutional Catholicism's tendency to dominate the lives of its adherents in every possible way (Rafferty 99; 100). All of these factors serve as a base for *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*. As Jo O'Donoghue says, it is an anti-Catholic novel, since "religion, far from liberating or empowering Judith Hearne, is the power that enslaves [her]" (O'Donoghue 3). Judith's faith is not based on free will and her own personal belief; it is more the pressure of society and the following of her aunt's attitude towards religion. When Miss Hearne and Mr Madden go to Mass together, both of their religious attitudes are described. She mentions that sometimes she was not a religious person, since she could not make interest in the Children of Mary or the decoration of altars (Moore 66). She avoided these since her aunt D'Arcy said that "[p]rayer and rigorous attention to one's religious duties will contribute far more towards one's personal salvation" and it was better to avoid the ladies who "devote themselves to God and His Blessed Mother" (Moore 66). This passage clearly indicates the insincerity of her faith with a mixture of snobbery, which her aunt passed on, even though it might have been good for Judith, who had no friends, to meet new people (O'Donoghue 18).

According to Jo O'Donoghue, the external look was crucial to the Catholic Church at the time as well. The church promoted people arriving to Sunday Mass in large numbers, praying on their knees (O'Donoghue 18; 19). Tom Inglis gives an explanation to this in his book *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*. He believes that Irish Catholics wanted to become equals with Protestants who had dominated them for a long time, so "worshipping in large, ornately furnished churches" was

necessary for the growth of the Catholic Church in the first half of the twentieth century (Inglis 247). Several examples from the novel confirm the superficialness of the Catholic faith. During the first Mass Judith attends in the novel, Father Quigley scolds those who arrive late and leave early, and is mad that people do not come to church during the week. What is more, he is also mad that people spend their money on the cinema, clothes and cigarettes but do not have money for the church (Moore 71; 72). This clearly shows that the church wished to control every part of peoples' lives, including what they spend their money on, where they go in their free time or even what they wear. There is also a slight threat in his speech, which is rather similar to the one the author heard as a child in connection with his confession. The priest says that if people do not have enough time for God, then God will not have enough time for them either. O'Donoghue also mentions that devotionism also included the establishment of a personal relationship with a saint (O'Donoghue 19). In Judith's case, it is the Sacred Heart, who she takes everywhere she goes and is her "guide and comforter" (Moore 66).

The character of Judith Hearne is a rather weak and uneducated one. Due to this, she would probably fail in any society, however Brian Moore created her as a product of the Catholic Irish society (O'Donoghue 6). She cannot express herself, cannot follow her free will since she lacks it, she does as she was taught and what is expected from a respectable Catholic woman: go to Mass every Sunday, do your Easter duty once a year, say your prayers and suppress every sexual desire. Jo O'Donoghue claims that Judith's poverty and lack of knowledge of herself is the other reason why she cannot have

real belief (O'Donoghue 15). When she says that “ religion was there: it was not something you thought about”, it is clear that only a person shaped by society from their childhood can have this sort of thinking (Moore 67). A person with real belief and free will would have a closer and more profound relationship with God, a better understanding of their faith. Judith believed if she always said her prayers and did her duty just like she was taught to do, her prayers would be answered. This blind faith and her complete devotion to the Sacred Heart is what leads to her final failure. When her expectations towards Mr Madden are not met she turns to alcohol. Her outrageous behavior while intoxicated ruins her reputation and makes her the talk of the house where she stayed, and when the landlady, Mrs Henry Rice, could not stand her behavior any longer Judith had to leave. She demands a sign from God and expects the Sacred Heart to give her answers or some advise. Once she realizes that her demands will not be met and not even Father Quigley can help her, actually does not even pay attention to her confession, her faith in the Catholic religion completely crumbles.

Tom Inglis also mentions the importance of the mothers to the Catholic Church in Ireland. He believes that without the Irish mother the Church's “ rigorous moral discipline could not have been attained” (Inglis 249). She represented the Church at home, she was the embodiment of Our Lady, she had to oversee the “ moral conduct of her husband and children” (Inglis 249). Inglis drew parallels between the mother figure and the Church: both maintained the power in their own environment, the mother at home while the Church in wider society. Both did the dirty work to take care of the members of their society, looked after the sick, the old, the young and the

distraught (Inglis 249). The main mother character of the novel is Mrs Henry Rice. Even though most readers might find her personality rather annoying, she almost perfectly fits the typical Irish mother that has been previously described. Tom Inglis mentions that mothers slaved for their husband and son (Inglis 249). This is true of the relationship of Mrs Rice and her adult son, Bernard. She does everything for him, almost acts like he is incapable of doing basic things so that she has to do them for him. This includes washing his hair or bringing breakfast up to his room so he does not have to go down to the dining room. She also mentions on more than one occasion that his “Bernie’s a little delicate” and should not work hard and just take his time (Moore 12). By doing everything for him, he became dependent on his mother, she had control over him, just like the Catholic Church had control over their members. Even though Mrs Rice did not have more children, her behavior towards her residents bears similarities with the expected mother-child relationship. She always makes sure that her residents behave in a proper way, that their moral conduct is appropriate. Once she realizes that Miss Hearne is an alcoholic, and that her son was in a sexual relationship with Mary, the maid, she throws both women out, since she cannot have two sinful persons live under her roof. She also demands that Bernie goes to the confessions, and tells him that Holy Communion and Mass would do him good (Moore 208).

It was the mother figure who helped the Church with the segregation of the sexes as well: “ the lack of physical contact between bodies, the denial of emotional expression, the ridicule and teasing about affection...partly accounts for the awkward distance between the sexes in Ireland” (Inglis

249). This embarrassment towards expressing any physical affection or creating contact with a man is part of Judith Hearne's personality. It seems like she feels extremely awkward around men, even around Bernard, especially when she thought he was staring at her. What is more, when she is out with Mr Madden at the pictures she feels like he is way too forward when he calls her Judy and puts his hand on hers. This repression of her sexuality was the expected behavior from her, and it was probably her aunt who taught her this, following the Church's 'instructions'. This type of social awkwardness made every human interaction very difficult, so it is not that surprising that Judith did not have a husband. Tom Inglis even says that this lead to formal and cold relationship between husband and wife in Ireland (Inglis 249).

Even though Judith Hearne's character would be doomed to failure in every society, the Catholic community of Belfast, that Brian Moore was so familiar with, made sure she ends up defeated. The strict and oppressing rules and expectations of the Roman Catholic Church in Northern Ireland, their need to control every aspect of their adherents' lives ruined Judith's chances of a normal life. She was too weak and was robbed of her free will, so having real faith was impossible for her. The open ending of the novel gives a chance to the reader to create their own ending for Judith Hearne. However, I believe that even if she is able to heal from her nervous breakdown, there is nothing left for her, not even the fake belief that she had throughout her life.

## **Works Cited**

Moore, Brian. *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*. London: Harper Perennial, 2007.  
<https://assignbuster.com/the-representation-of-catholicism-in-brian-moores-the-lonely-passion-of-judith-hearne/>



O'Donoghue, Jo. Brian Moore: A Critical Study. London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991.

Tom, Inglis. Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland. Dublin: University College Dublin, 1998. [http://www.anovasofie.net/vl/countries/ireland/docs/01/irl\\_01\\_01\\_moral.pdf](http://www.anovasofie.net/vl/countries/ireland/docs/01/irl_01_01_moral.pdf). Accessed 3 April. 2018.

Kiberd. Declan. Inventing Ireland. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. <https://archive.org/stream/inventingireland00decl>. Accessed 1 April. 2018.

Hartill, Rosemary. Writers Revealed: Eight Contemporary Novelists Talk about Faith, Religion and God. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1989. <https://archive.org/stream/writersrevealed00hart#page/n5/mode/2up>. Accessed 1 April. 2018.

Cleary, Joe. Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland. Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007. <https://books.google.hu/books>. Accessed 4 April. 2018.

Rafferty, Oliver P.. "The Catholic Church and the Nationalist Community in Northern Ireland since 1960." *Éire-Ireland*, Volume 43: 1&2, Earrach/Samhradh / Spring/Summer 2008, pp. 99-125. Irish-American Cultural Institute. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.0.0011>. Accessed 3 April. 2018.