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'Intimacy and the Insipid: Sensual proximity in the work of John McGahern'

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Abstract This text is concerned with tracing the contours of Irish writer John McGahern's narrative fiction under the circumstances in which he explores the theme of sexuality in his early novels. It further seeks to explore how sexuality governs how human beings engage and understand the world in which they live within Irish society in the 20th century and in so doing, attempts to bring about greater freedom in how such matters are portrayed and discussed in the wider community.

Keywords Irish literature, sexuality, censorship, narrative fiction, freedom

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Introduction

John McGahern, a name heavily associated with the chronicling of Irish rural life of times past, was a writer whose talent for revealing the subtle and the stark of Irish life, particularly within the confines of the family. McGahern's work has won much praise and given an even greater deal of poise to imaginative constructs of private settings and intimate feelings in an era which ensured a hostile environment for any mention, much less the slightest attempt to render imaginative portraits of the struggles of ordinary people with one another and within themselves. McGahern's widely acknowledged place as a key chronicler of change in Irish culture sometimes overlooks the fact that in so rendering those changes within his fictive spheres, through his work - he himself became a catalyst for further change. An oppressive society tightly regulated by conservative Catholic doctrine ensured that the Ireland of the 1940s to the 1980s represented in McGahern's writings was quite averse to any discussion relating to sex or sexuality. Attitudes towards sexuality were so draconian that even the most cursory reference in the form of a single word would – often did actually did – result in the banning of the text in question and serious professional and personal repercussions for the author of that text. Indeed, it is well documented that McGahern himself had some of his work banned, the example of course being his 1965 novel *The Dark* that makes no uncertain allusions to what was then considered taboo in the form of images of inappropriate sexual contact and lewd language. One can find the insipid materialize as issues of intimacy are quickly dismissed and denied at the height of the puritanical environment in conservative Catholic Ireland, which McGahern sought to challenge.

Writing in 2017, Máire Doyle remarked that in this context, McGahern was engaged in '…throughout his writings the experience of love function as the agency through which many of his characters negotiated their place in the world. The discourse of love embodies the individual's desire to find a way to be in and to relate to the world' (Doyle 2017, 124).

Representations of sexual frustrations and intimate relations became as Tom Inglis has noted, as being more palatable and more desirable in an Ireland that began to witness a discernible decline in the hegemonic power of the Catholic Church that started to experience the effects of globalization, secularization and sexualization. McGahern, he remarks, painted a picture of the complex evolution of emotions which came with the transformation of a traditional Catholic identity that: '…based on humility, piety, chastity and self-denial – to a new secular self that was more in control of its own destiny, that was less reverential of formal authority and that saw the pursuit of pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, as a good thing' (Inglis 2017, 112).

The pursuit of pleasure, Inglis asserts, was a central feature of McGahern's fiction which revealed the atmosphere and living conditions in Catholic Ireland in the latter half of the twentieth century. This also allowed McGahern to demonstrate the sentiments and conditions under which people made love and had sex as Irish society shifted from self-denial towards embracing a more modern, cosmopolitan culture that foregrounds self-indulgence and personal fulfilment (Inglis 2017, 110).

Attitudes to sex and sexuality in popular culture: origins and trends

The fulfilment of the self and the pursuit of satisfaction of one's desires is, of course, not new. As I have noted in a previous paper: 'Even with the evolution of fashion and the built environment, the essence of human desire to be loved remains unchanged. It would seem this one desire cannot be refined out of existence by human evolution' (Wakefield 2022, 45). Moreover, this need for love and affection owes much to:

> …the complexity of the human condition and how love and romantic associations create further complexities to colonise the minds of men and women alike as they seek to find meaning in their existence The essential element of interest is attained without great difficultly since the subject matter – that of love and desire to form romantic attachments to other people – is a universal theme that weathers waves of time and fashion alike (Wakefield 2022, 57).

Following a prolonged period of conservative attitudes towards sexuality which intensified during the Victorian period, a gradual change in the treatment of sex and sexuality becomes more noticeable in the 1910s, which Glickberg (1973) remarks was characterized by a genuine interest in faithfully representing the truth of life and this did not need to rely upon or pay homage to narratives that were pedagogical nor did they have to concern themselves with evangelical principles or censorious tendencies. Thus, a growing tendency gained momentum behind the idea that it was perfectly desirable to satisfy the human instinct and asserting this need was indeed commendable. In turn, it was felt that surrendering to sexual desire was actually beneficial to mental health (Glickberg 1973, 184).

Conspicuous too was the spectre of nineteenth century Irish Catholicism where Catholic attitudes towards sex took firm root and became deeply ingrained for a longer period of time than in other countries which made it exceedingly difficult not only to detect but even to imagine any possible challenge to the existing cultural order. In McGahern's Ireland, only the latter half of the twentieth century saw a significant change in attitudes to allow any meaningful alternatives to be imagined (Inglis 2005, 12-13). Writing in 2005, Inglis was wont to remark that 'the lack of research into the history of Irish sexuality is puzzling' and he posited that it was possible that the dominance of the Catholic

Church in the academic disciplines of philosophy, psychology and sociology may have dampened interested in such a field of inquiry. It would not be surprising then to note that a sense of shame and awkwardness about sex and the complex emotions which it involves was imposed by conservative Catholic doctrine served to retard enquiry and reflection in that area (Inglis 2005, 10).

Commenting on the role of women in the context of women and their relationship with the church since Famine times, J. J. Lee (1978) asserted that the greater good of the nation had to be put before the interests of individuals and this necessitated banishing temptation beyond reach. To achieve this marriage would have to be delayed until a later stage and the sexes had to be segregated so as to be consistent with the principle that sex was to be regarded as 'a satanic snare' since it represented a much more potent threat to the purity and stability of the family than even the landlord (Lee 1978, 39). This attitude was consistent with the idea that 'self-abnegation as the way to happiness on earth and afterwards' (Rowbothan 1989, 57).

Maintaining the existing social order necessarily relied upon protecting a privileged vision of civilization that Duncan Crow understands as depending 'on the subjugation of sex, not its release or aggrandizement' (Crow 1972: 13). Indeed, for Crow such strategies were centrally concerned with banning '…sex as far as possible from everyday life and to enlarge to its fullest extent the interpretation of the Sixth Commandment so that it brought social anathema and hell-fire not only on adultery but on all lewd thoughts and fumblings' (Crow 1972, 25).

A growing body of opinion was of the conviction that freely explored sexual desires was indeed a positive and productive stance, an approach which stemmed from a renewed sense of vigour invested in the study of sex and sexuality from the late 19th and early 20th century. Gone were the convictions that embracing such ideas would amount to the abandonment of morality. Instead, the benefits were held to extend not just to the individual but thought to have a beneficial effect on the entire fabric of society and the individuals within it (Weeks 2014, 184). Wider events outside of Ireland caused ripples to flow across Irish society, events such as the revolts in Paris from 1968 and in the United States, eastern Europe and Tokyo count among these. Tumultuous happenings on the streets of Paris in that same year bore testament to the rising feeling of doubt in the post-war conviction that prosperity could be gained without significant effort and this was itself a symptom of the crystallization of contradictions appropriated by the youth in modern capitalist societies. The net effect of the student revolts and the general strike that arose from it meant old certainties no longer held sway so that the promise of the mantra 'anything was possible' was within reach (Weeks 2014, 357). Achieving such lofty aims meant that from the 1960s (an era which saw two of McGahern's novels published) faith in the traditional elite had ebbed away to such an extent that new ideas required new means of expression. Such was the force of these changes that much value was attached to the needs and desires of the individual (as opposed to the family) took precedence. As individual needs took centre stage, so too did the sexuality of the person (Weeks 2014, 368).

In his 1992 book *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Anthony Giddens joins the chorus of approval towards the open expression and enjoyment of sexuality in how he believes that 'Sexuality, appropriately expressed, is our main source of happiness and whoever is happy is free from the thirst for power (…) Sexuality oriented to the 'loving embrace' offers 'freedom from the constraints of unmastered sexual desire' (Giddens 1992, 160).

It is at this point we begin to see the role and power of McGahern's fiction in providing many of the means and much of the momentum for a healthier expression and understanding of sexuality which materialized over time in the latter half of the twentieth century in Ireland. McGahern's work including *The Dark* and some of his short stories, particularly 'My Love, My Umbrella' and 'The Conversion of William Kirkwood' are quite important in this respect. As Eamon Maher has stated, McGahern 'diagnosed more acutely than anyone else 'sexual sicknesses of a repressive culture. The stultifying narrowness of the official culture of Church and State clings like a bad smell to the people whose lives he explores' (Maher 2011, 11).

Love and longing in McGahern's short stories

McGahern's sensitive and careful treatment of the cultural politics of sexuality in Ireland is evident in his short story 'My Love, My Umbrella'. In this story, it quickly becomes clear that the two lovers it features suffer from a sense of anxiety and embarrassment about their ability to express their sexuality. The protagonists spend time together in public houses when possible. During one such encounter the lover's converse:

> 'It's strange, the band,' I said; her face flinched away, and in the same movement back, turned to see who'd spoken. Her skin under the same movement back, turned to see who'd spoken. Her skin under the black hair had the glow of health and youth, and the solidity at the bones of the hips gave promise of a rich seed-bed. (McGahern 2006, 158)

The sexual tension is evident, if muted at this point. There is a clear attraction between the parties. Once the entertainment in their present location has ended for the evening, the man walks the lady back to her lodgings. Lustful feelings permeate the atmosphere:

'Will I be able to come in?' I asked (McGahern 2006, 61).

'It would cause trouble.'

'You have your own room?'

'The man who owns the house watches. He would make trouble.'

The woman's answer is reflective of the conservative morals that run through some segments of society and which directly affect her ability to live her private life. The couple is forced to remain outside her lodgings if they wish to spend more time together. In an attempt to find a secluded space, they walk to the grounds of a church which McGahern describes: 'Behind the church was a dead end overhung with old trees, and the street lights did not reach as far as the wall at its end, a grew orchard wall with some ivy' (McGahern 2006, 61).

The man's lust undaunted by the outdoors, he asks: 'Can we stay here a short time, then?'

Even though it is raining, he is surprised to hear: 'Not for long, it is late.'

Some semblance of modesty on the part of the woman manifests itself here but this sense of propriety quickly breaks down as lust takes hold of both parties:

(…) We moved under the umbrella out of the street light, fumbling for certain footing between the tree roots.

'Will you hold the umbrella?'

She took the imitation leather with the white stitching in her hands (McGahern 2006, 161)

Both parties then surrender to their current lustful disposition and intimate contact is made despite misgivings:

Our lips moved on the saliva of our mouths as I slowly undid the coat button. I tried to control the trembling so as not to tear the small white buttons of the blouse. Coat, blouse, brassiere, as names of places on a road. I globed the warm soft breasts in hands. I leaned across the cold metal above the imitation leather she held in her hands to take the small nipples gently in teeth, the steady beat on the umbrella broken by irregular splashes from the branches.

Will she let me? I was afraid as I lifted the woollen skirt; and slowly I moved hands up the soft insides of the thighs, and instead of the 'No' I feared and waited for, the handle became a hard pressure as she pressed on my lips.

I could no longer control the trembling as I felt the sheen of the knickers, I drew them down to her knees, and parted the lips to touch her juices. She hung on my lips. She twitched as the fingers went deeper. She was a virgin. (McGahern 2006, 61).

McGahern's acutely explicit rendering of a rather awkward intimate encounter between two lovers who are frustrated by other people's morals which forces them to take risks and engage in sexual relations in a public place serves as means to challenge relatively puritan attitudes towards matters of sexuality. In offering a depiction of such an encounter, readers are given an insight into the conditions faced and decisions made by those who wish to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage without approval from wider society.

The woman's reaction to her lover's intimate physical touching reveals her to be virgin as they fumble on a rainy night under their umbrella. Her need for intimacy overcomes whatever lingering doubts instilled by conservative attitudes and she allows the encounter to come to its natural conclusion without forcing her lover to stop earlier than desired.

Whatever discomfort may have been felt between the parties, particularly the woman, the enjoyment derived from the encounter ensures that more such meetings take place as McGahern indicates:

We met against those silver radiators three evenings every week for long. We went to cinemas or sat in pubs, it was the course of our love, and as it always rained, we made love under the umbrella beneath the same trees in the same way. They say the continuance of sexuality is due to the penis having no memory, and mine each evening spilt its seed into the mud and decomposing leaves as if it was always for the first time. (…) (McGahern 2006, 62).

The physical pleasure which comes from their continued sexual relations encourages further desire to continue their meetings. Her male lover appears to display a voracious sexual appetite and is quite content to prolong their pleasure for as long as possible as they both find some comfort in frequenting the same location to engage in sexual relations.

As gradual as the rain fell around them each evening, they met, a creeping sense of guilt begins to assert its presence over their minds until it eventually motivates a verbal manifestation of apprehension:

In the rain we made love again, she the fiercer, and after the seed spilled, she said, 'Wait,' and moving on a dying penis, under the unsteady umbrella in her hands, she trembled towards an inarticulate cry of pleasure, and as

> we walked into the street lamp I asked, we had so fallen into the habit of each other, 'Would you think we should ever get married?' 'Kiss me.' She leaned across the steel between us. 'Do you think we should?' I repeated. 'What would it mean to you?' she asked (McGahern 2006, 63).

Such is the urge to address notions of probity; the ultimate status symbol of respectability in a relationship at that time – in the institution of marriage – becomes a topic of their musings. It seems curious for this topic to come to the fore once it is evident that penetration takes place, which appears to trigger feelings of guilt and leads to the explicit reference to possible nuptials.

A legitimate fear is present within the female lover and this can be understood in the context of the Magdalene Laundries, residential-institutions managed by nuns in Ireland between 1922 and 1996. These places were founded to forcibly removed from society what were known as 'fallen' or 'wayward' women whose morals and public conduct seriously breached the Catholic notion of moral probity. Strict teachings on spirituality, frugality and sexual restraint coupled with penance, prayer and years of unpaid physical labour were imposed on these women (many of whom had children outside of wedlock). Many thousands of these women were permanently deprived of their liberty while other guilty parties escaped responsibility (Titley 2006, 2-3, 7-8). In this light, the spectre of being permanently detained in an institution where one's dignity and even original names were discarded casts a deep shadow on the woman's thoughts.

In contrast, the relatively nonchalant stance adopted by the male lover sees him continue to enjoy their intimate pleasures, while the woman remains enthralled to her morals and this manifests further complications as time progresses. His lack of concern over the absence of propriety is quite apparent: 'What I had were longings or fears rather than any meanings…' (McGahern 2006, 63). Her misgivings begin to assume a more contemptuous form as one terse exchange reveals:

> We made love awkwardly, the umbrella lying in the dry leaves, but I was angry when she wouldn't fall in with my wish, and another night when she asked, 'Where are you going on your holidays?' I lied that I didn't know. 'I'll go home if I haven't enough money. And you?' I asked. She didn't answer. I saw she resented that I'd made no effort to include her in the holiday. Sun and sand and sea, I thought maliciously, and decided to break free from her. Summer was coming and the world full of possibilities. I did not lead her under the trees behind the church, but left after kissing her lightly, 'Goodnight.' Instead of arranging to meet as usual at the radiators, I said, 'I'll ring you during the week.' Her look of anger and hatred elated me. 'Ring me if you want,' she said as she angrily closed the door. (McGahern 2006, 65).

The woman's increasingly combative tone has a chilling effect on their bond and this allows her male lover to excuse himself as he procrastinates over when he should get in touch with her again. Their time apart, perhaps no more than a few days, has the effect of growing his affection for her and this provides the necessary impulse he needs to contact her again:

> In the empty room trying to read, while the trains went by at the end of the garden with its two apple trees and one pear, I began to realize I'd fallen more into the habit of her than I'd known. Not wanting to have to see the umbrella I put it behind the wardrobe, but it seemed to be more present than ever there; and often the longing for her lips, her body, grew, close to sickness, and eventually dragged me to the telephone. (…) (McGahern 2006, 65).

After some discussion and negotiation, a date for a new meeting is settled upon in a hotel. Moral considerations have by now become a strong weight on the woman's conscience and consequently her conduct and attitude toward their future together:

> 'What did you want to say?' I asked when the barman had returned to polishing the glasses.
>
> 'That I've thought about it and that our going out is a waste of time. It's a waste of your time and mine.'
>
> 'It was as if a bandage had been torn from an open wound.
>
> 'But why?'
>
> It will come to nothing.

Once he realizes the enormity of her decision, the man is possessed with regret which is proportional to his level of affection and attachment. His thoughts make these sentiments intelligible to the outside world:

> (…) 'I thought that after a time we would get married.' I would grovel on the earth or anything to keep her then. Little by little my life had fallen into her keeping, it was only in the loss I had come to know it, life without her, the pain of the loss of my own life without the oblivion the dead have, all longing changed to die out of my own life on her lips, in her thighs, since it was only through her it lived. (…)

Such sentiments illustrate how characters can find a notion of place and a sense of meaning through their love for another and their attachment to them. When those feelings are discontinued or rejected it can threaten the apparent

insight that a romantic relationship can bestow upon its participants. Its ending can bring a grief of its own as the man feels:

> It was clean as a knife. I watch her climb on the bus, fumble in her handbag, take the fare from a small purse, open her hand to the conductor as the bus turned the corner. I watched to see if she'd look back, if she'd give any sign, but she did not. All my love and life had gone and I had to wait till it was gone to know it. (McGahern 2006, 66).

Facing the permanent absence of 'the loving embrace' the man surrenders to his sense of loss. Bereft at his condition, he is forced to mourn the end of his relationship without a satisfactory explanation and thus suffers the further loss of the society of his lover due to her capitulation to her doubts inspired by guilt. His umbrella against the natural elements of humankind now gone, he must weather what is to come without intimate comforts of the flesh. What may seem a relatively banal occurrence compared to other events in the wider scheme of life, is in effect something impactful that can affect any individual and this McGahern captures in his writing in a way which Fintan O' Toole in his foreward to Eamon Maher's *The Church and its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic Question* declares as being 'seemingly inconsequential without every approaching the banal (Maher 2011, 12).

Conclusion

What was once a sensitive and taboo theme in Irish society, the discussion around and depiction of sex and sexuality in Irish literature and the wider world has evolved considerably in recent decades to reach a position where it is now openly discussed and debated. Issues dealing with intimacy have ironically become much more familiar and McGahern's sensitive treatment of sexuality has made a significant contribution to the creation of this new state of being in fiction about Irish life (e.g. the work of Sally Rooney). Intimacy has now become much more insipid in manner that reflects the sentiments expressed by Milan Kundera who, in reply to a question from Philip Roth concerning what sex means to a novelist, where Kundera affirms:

> These days, when sexuality is no longer taboo, mere description, mere sexual confession, has become noticeably boring (…) I have the feeling that a scene of physical love generates an extremely sharp light which suddenly reveals the essence of characters and sums up their life situation…The erotic scene is the focus where all the themes of the story converge and where its deepest secrets are located…And precisely because it is the deepest region of life the question posed to sexuality is the deepest question. (Kundera 1981, 236-37).

A great debt is owed to the fictive world McGahern created in unravelling and questioning dysfunctional attitudes toward sexuality in Ireland. Touching the deepest questions must remain at the heart of the writer's reason for being and this McGahern did with aplomb.

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