

# THEN AND NOW: MEMORIES OF A PATRIARCHAL IRELAND IN THE WORK OF MARIAN KEYES

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**Abstract** || This paper will observe how the work of Irish author Marian Keyes is influenced by, and representative of, the place of women in Ireland in terms of historical issues, social values, and legal issues. It will discuss two primary areas that have affected women in Irish society: the family and the female body. In addressing how such issues were traditionally viewed in Irish society, this paper will demonstrate how Keyes' novels present an awareness –a memory– of how Irish women's lives were once repressed by patriarchal values, and how contemporary women still, to some extent, feel the effects –the restraints– of such attitudes.

**Key-words** || Feminism | Women | Ireland | Women's Fiction | Family | The Body.

## 0. Introduction

While Irish author Marian Keyes is perhaps most commonly referred to as a chick lit author, it is, however, important to recognise that, first and foremost, Keyes is an Irish author; we can assume that her Irish upbringing and the Ireland in which she now lives both influence her work to some extent, and issues which were once, or still are, prevalent in Ireland are both explicitly and implicitly referred to within her work.

This paper will observe how Keyes' work is influenced by, and representative of, the place of women in Ireland in terms of historical issues, social values, and legal issues. In doing so, it will discuss two areas that have affected women in Irish society: marriage, motherhood and the family, and the female body. In addressing how such issues were traditionally viewed in Irish society, this paper will demonstrate how Keyes' novels present an awareness –a memory– of how Irish women's lives were once repressed by patriarchal values, and how contemporary women still, to some extent, feel the effects –the restraints– of such attitudes.

## 1. Ireland, the family, marriage and motherhood

Much feminist debate has tended to focus on the «timeless and naturalized association of women with the home» (Whelehan, 1995: 9). As Ireland has often been viewed as a predominantly patriarchal society, largely due to «its “traditional stance” on reproductive rights and the low participation of women in the labour force» (O'Connor, 1998: 3), this connection of women with the home and family is perhaps even more prevalent regarding Irish society. In 1937, the Irish Constitution included a number of laws which «encouraged the maternal and submissive roles expected of women through which they were meant to improve their country's fate» (Barros del Río, 2000: sp.). Irish society allowed two very limited options for the roles of women: the image of the Virgin Mary was regarded as the ideal role model for women, while the image of the mother was considered to be the prototype of Irish women.

Ireland's emphasis on women's morality and home-making duties was thought to be so important that even the education which was provided to young girls reflected the duties they would be expected to perform when they married and had a family; it was assumed that this would be every Irish girl's future, and it was unthinkable that any woman would desire, or obtain, something other than marriage and motherhood. These ideals were encouraged in various other formats; even the Irish television and radio broadcasting company, RTÉ, was once advised «to defend traditional ideals of marriage

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and motherhood» (Hill, 2003: 143). Irish women thus felt enormous pressure from a wide variety of outside influences –Church, society, family, even television– as to the path their life should take and, as a result, marriage and motherhood became the ultimate goal of most young women in Ireland.

The sanctity of the home and motherhood in Ireland is obvious when we consider the relatively low number of married women in paid employment: «only 5.6 per cent in 1926 and remaining at around this level until the 1960s» (Hill, 2003: 100), as well as the laws which were passed with the aim of keeping women in the home and out of the workforce. In 1933, for example, a law was passed which required national schoolteachers to resign on marriage, and the 1935 Employment Act extended this marriage bar to include all civil service posts. Even though this marriage bar in Ireland was never *legally* enforced on employment positions outside of the civil service, there were clear indications that, up to the mid-1970s at least, it was expected that women would retire upon marriage. This was encouraged in a number of ways: «through the marriage gratuity (i.e. a lump sum paid to women on their marriage and subsequent retirement); through separate and higher pay scales for married men, and through related tax and social welfare arrangements» (O'Connor, 1998: 38). In *The Other Side of the Story* (2004), Gemma, one of Keyes' protagonists, considers this lack of options her mother, like many other women, had as a young woman in Ireland:

Hard to believe that Mam had once had a job—she'd worked in a typing pool, which is where she'd met Dad. But she gave up work when she got pregnant with me; after the previous miscarriage she wasn't taking any chances. Maybe she would have given up her job anyway, after I'd been born, because that was what Irish women did in those days. (Keyes, 2004: 61)

Despite Ireland's «emphasis on the desirability of the married state, most brides reached that altar in blissful ignorance of the details of wifely duty» (Hill, 2003: 21), and so, as with women all over the world, Irish women began to feel dissatisfied with the constricting nature of life secluded in the private realm. They began to realise that their “natural” place in the home could also be filled with limitations, stresses and struggles; that even though «women who married and had children were conforming to their gender role, this did not leave them immune from unhappiness» (McCarthy, 2000: 105). While much of this unhappiness stemmed from feelings of loneliness and isolation, one of «the most common, yet least discussed, causes of marital unhappiness, and indeed of relationship problems in general, was abuse, mental or physical, usually inflicted by men on their female partners» (Hill, 2003: 148), issues which were once silenced and hidden from public knowledge, and which Keyes has discussed in two of her later novels, *This Charming Man* (2008) and *The Brightest Star in the Sky* (2009). Both novels contain frighteningly

realistic accounts of domestic violence and abuse, and are also useful in outlining the extent to which domestic violence and rape have been unreported and, perhaps worse, ignored when they have been reported. In the Republic of Ireland alone, it has been estimated that a staggering one-fifth to one-third of all women have, at some time, experienced violence within a relationship, figures which are reiterated in *This Charming Man*, though it is thought that these figures may not cover the full extent of violence, due to so many cases remaining unreported:

Concern has been expressed about the often lenient sentencing of offenders, but even more worrying is that so many of the cases are not brought to court. A range of factors may prevent women from taking action – concern for the welfare and safety of their children, embarrassment, fear of reprisals, insecurities about finance and housing, and for many, the feeling that they themselves are to blame for their situation. But evidence suggests that even when they are willing to take action against their partners, abused women find it difficult to be taken seriously and have little confidence in the police. (Hill, 2003: 192)

Such circumstances are portrayed in *The Brightest Star in the Sky* as newly-married Maeve is brutally raped by her ex-boyfriend. This novel focuses largely on the concern that so many rape and domestic violence cases tend not to be taken seriously. When Maeve finds the courage to report the crime, she is devastated to realise that no one believes her. She is questioned about the clothes she was wearing at the time of the attack, to which her husband retorts that they are «not very provocative, are they?» (Keyes, 2009: 533), alluding to the misconception that if a woman dresses and acts “provocatively” then she is thought to be at least partially, if not totally, responsible for being raped. In this sense, rape is viewed as «punishment for women who express their sexuality» (Viney, 1989: 54); in other words, the woman is seen to be “asking for it”. Rather than receiving reassurance from the police, Maeve is made to feel that the rape was her own fault, and is dissuaded from making a formal complaint:

‘It’s your word against his. Look,’ Vincent leaned closer to her. ‘Are you sure you didn’t just, you know, get a bout of the guilts? One last go, for old times’ sake, then got afraid that hubby there might get wind.’  
‘I’m sure.’  
‘Are you sure you want to go ahead with this? Taking it further?’  
‘I’m sure.’  
‘Because it’ll ruin his life, you know. Just so as you know.’ (Keyes, 2009: 336)

Maeve is later informed that it has been decided that there is not enough evidence to result in a conviction and so the police are not proceeding with the prosecution:

‘Innocent until proven, and all that.’  
‘But how can it be proved if it doesn’t go to court? Maeve and I, we

work in the same place as him. You're saying he'll just carry on with his job and everything like nothing happened?'

'In the eyes of the law he's done nothing wrong.' The guard heaved himself up to leave. 'Why should the man lose his job?' (Keyes, 2009: 537)

Such were the choices many women had: suffer in silence, or speak up and risk being ignored. In Maeve's case, her feelings of isolation and helplessness resulted in both her and her husband becoming severely depressed and suicidal. Maeve's husband, Matt, reflected on the injustice that arises out of many rape allegations, which allows Keyes to report on the shockingly low conviction rates for rape in Ireland:

Matt had discovered things he'd never before thought about: that only one in ten reported rapes make it to court; that out of them, only six in a hundred result in a conviction. And what about all the rapes that are never reported, because the girl is too scared. Of her rapist? Of the police? All those rapes unacknowledged, unavenged. It was enough to drive him mad. How was the world as normal as it was? How was all that rage and injustice and grief and fear contained? (Keyes, 2009: 541-542)

In doing so, Keyes is helping to «highlight the serious nature and widespread prevalence of violence experienced by women» (Hill, 2003: 148), and, if more authors follow Keyes' example and openly discuss such serious issues, it will hopefully result in it becoming an issue which is increasingly difficult to ignore.

Women suffered so much in the private domain largely because there were very few laws in Ireland which protected them in the home, and, indeed, within society in general. In fact, until the early 1970s, the family law statutes in Ireland were the same since the Victorian period, a time when women were received little legal recognition, and crimes such as domestic violence and rape were silenced and hidden from the public. Additionally, laws were in place which meant that the «battered wife and mother could not exclude her violent husband from the home (which was almost invariably his) except by resort to the most cumbersome procedures» (Scannell, 1988: 73). While progress has since been made to protect women and children in such situations, theorists have noted that even in the late twentieth century, women in Ireland «remained vulnerable to violence within the home» (Hill, 2003: 191). Such situations are noted in *This Charming Man*, where a victim of domestic violence, model/actress Zara Kaletsky, describes how the police did nothing to help her, seeing the violence she was so obviously subjected to as “only a domestic”, leaving Zara feeling that reporting the crime to the police, the people who should be able to help her, was a “mistake”, a feeling that many victims of domestic violence have also revealed feeling:

'I made the mistake of going to the police. He was so angry I thought he was going to kill me.'

*She went to the police?*

'And was he, like, *charged?*' How had he kept that out of the press?

'Not at all.' She rolled her eyes. 'These two fat eejits showed up in their yellow jackets and as soon as they'd established it was "only" a domestic, they told us to kiss and make up, then were off down the road to buy chips and batterburgers. All I could do was apply for a barring order – which would take twelve weeks.' (Keyes, 2008: 591)

When we consider that Zara was informed that her only option was to apply for a barring order, which would leave her vulnerable to even more violence during the months that it would take to organise, it again highlights that the Irish law is not yet seeing the full extent of the seriousness and the danger that some women experience in the home; as journalist Grace Gildee dejectedly realises in the same novel, «no one cares about domestic violence» (Keyes, 2008: 179).

Irish feminists eventually realised that the Irish family was, for many women, a far from perfect place; that women were afforded few rights and were often trapped in damaging and unhappy situations, from which they could see little escape. It was noted how «the depiction of male violence, rape, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, marital violence or pornography as "not that serious" erodes women's sense of their own bodily integrity and ultimately their sense of their own value» (O'Connor, 1998: 14). With the help of feminist activism in Ireland, which worked relentlessly to protect women in family life, eventually women's situations were brought to public attention and laws began to reflect this new knowledge. Theorist Clodagh Corcoran stressed that if society is to combat issues such as rape and domestic violence, along with other forms of oppression, then such issues must be treated «as a civil rights issue for women, demanding appropriate legislation» (Corcoran, 1989: 20). Following this hope, *The Brightest Star in the Sky* ends on an optimistic note which reflects the aim to bring such issues to public attention: one of the final chapters is a flash-forward to the future in which most of the main characters are attending a public rally on the streets of Dublin to «protest against the low conviction rate for Irish rapists» (Keyes, 2009: 594), depicting a utopian vision for the future in which rape and domestic violence are no longer hidden in Irish society, and where demands for change are voiced publicly.

Another area which proved problematic among Irish women was the fear of pregnancy outside of marriage, ironic considering Ireland's reverence of motherhood in women. With the long-running controversy regarding contraception combined with the changing attitudes to sexual behaviour in Ireland, the result has been an increasing number of pregnancies occurring outside of marriage,

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which posed a threat to Ireland's strict Catholic morality. Records of the number of "illegitimate pregnancies" which occurred in Ireland in the late twentieth century have shown an enormous increase on both sides of the border, «from 2.6 per cent of all births in the Republic in 1970 to reach 22.5 per cent by 1995, and from 3.6 per cent to 21.8 per cent in the North in the same period» (Hill, 2003: 146).

The marginal and stigmatised position of the unmarried mother «provides a good perspective from which to consider changing gender roles, and the values and institutions in society» (Joannou, 2000: 42). Within Irish society, with its emphasis on chastity and self-restraint, despite assertions regarding the sanctity of motherhood, the reality was that «children were only welcomed when born within a union legalised by marriage» (Hill, 2003: 27); illegitimacy was considered socially unacceptable and the unmarried mother faced punishment by society for her "deviant" ways. While the Catholic Church once maintained that «illegitimacy rates were low because of the shame and humiliation with which such a condition was associated» (Hill, 2003: 29), with the absence of reliable, accessible, and affordable contraceptive methods until relatively recently, it was more likely that other precautions were taken to assure that a child conceived out of wedlock was not considered "illegitimate", largely in order to protect the mother (and her family) from shame:

It is likely that in many cases couples –Catholic and Protestant– legitimated their expected child by marriage, either through preference or under pressure from family and Church, passing off the 'early' birth as premature. Illegitimate children were also frequently brought up by their grandmother or other family member, or in the workhouse or other charitable institution. (Hill, 2003: 29)

Of the women who gave their babies up for adoption, their experiences have often remained hidden, their "wrong-doing" silenced. Those women who did fall pregnant outside of marriage – and who remained unmarried and kept the child– had to rely on their families for economic survival, and this was only when the woman in question could depend on her family's tolerance and acceptance of her "sexual nonconformity"; many Irish «parents, particularly those of the middle classes –fearful of public contempt or reluctant to support the economic burden of an unmarriageable daughter– cast their daughters from their homes» (McCarthy, 2000: 104). Up until the early 1960s, in fact, «women who had children outside of marriage were perceived as "Magdalenes", and were cut off from the community for most of their lives in institutions under Church control» (O'Connor, 1998: 119). As well as creating shame and controversy for both families and society in general, the unmarried mother is also viewed as problematic in Irish society because it is seen to undermine the sanctity of the family that was inherent to Irish morality for so long. Single motherhood was once considered so shameful in Ireland that



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«children born outside of wedlock were discriminated against in the law» (Connolly, 2005: 3). However, this situation has changed in Ireland in the last few years, largely due to the fact that «the number of unmarried mothers in Irish society continued to increase during the last two decades of the [twentieth] century» (Hill, 2003: 193), despite the fact that «everyone over sixteen has had the right to contraception since the early nineties, and with AIDS making it a public health issue, condoms could be bought from machines from 1993» (Hill, 2003: 193).

Whatever the reasons for the high birth rates outside of marriage, it is clear that the consequences of pregnancy outside of marriage are now considered less catastrophic than in earlier decades. Some theorists, such as Pat O'Connor, have even depicted lone parenthood in a positive light, stating how it has the potential to reflect «the ability of women to survive on their own, and their willingness to redefine the family, excluding a residential heterosexual tie as the basic element in that unit» (O'Connor, 1998: 119). This recently-found tolerance of single motherhood in Ireland is evident in a number of Keyes' novels, which portray single mothers. *Watermelon* (1995), for instance, is a novel centred on single motherhood, in which protagonist Claire Walsh's husband leaves her for another woman on the day she gives birth to their first child. Claire is portrayed as a strong, independent woman who admirably copes with her situation with grace, humour, and maturity, as portrayed in the following extract in which Claire reflects on her circumstances:

My marriage had broken up, but I had a beautiful child. I had a wonderful family, very good friends and a job to go back to. Who knew, one day, I might even meet a nice man who wouldn't mind taking Kate on as well as me. Or if I waited long enough maybe Kate would meet a nice man who wouldn't mind taking me on as well as her. But in the meantime I had decided that I was just going to get on with my life and if Mr Perfect arrived along, I'd manage to make room for him somewhere. (Keyes, 2003b: 565)

Keyes also presents women who become remain single mothers by their own choice, such as in *Anybody Out There?* (2006), when Anna's best friend, Jacqui, becomes pregnant as the result of a one night stand. Far from this being the tragedy it would have been up until relatively recently, Jacqui is admirably calm and rational about the situation:

'I know. I've been thinking.' Pause. 'Being pregnant isn't the horrible disaster it would have been five years ago, or even three years. Back then, I'd no security, I hadn't a bean and I'd definitely have had a termination. But now... I have an apartment, I have a well-paid job – it's not *their* fault that I can't live within my means – and I sort of like the idea of having a baby around the place.' (Keyes, 2006: 470-471)

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In the epilogue to *Anybody Out There?*, we learn that new-mother Jacqui is part of the narrator calls a «modern-day family unit» (Keyes, 2006: 587) in which the baby's parents both enjoy time with their child but do not feel obliged to become a couple merely for the child's sake, as Irish society would have once expected. The novel therefore demonstrates how the marginal position of the unmarried mother, once viewed as a threat to the status quo and a cause for unofficial concern, now provides a «good perspective from which to consider changing gender roles» (Joannou, 2000: 42); *Anybody Out There?* presents a depiction of this “modern” family, where the parents are happily unmarried, and neither mother nor child are “punished” for this. By portraying lone parenthood in a positive sense, novels such as *Anybody Out There?* are providing an implicit challenge to «the traditional “unthinkableness” of a family life which is not based on a residential conjugal unit» (O'Connor, 1998: 122), thus helping to remove the stigma so commonly associated with unmarried mothers in Ireland.

Clearly, the notion of “family” in Ireland is gradually beginning to change. As the end of the twentieth century neared, it was noted that, in Ireland and other Western European countries, there was «a dramatic decline in the rate of marriage and an increasing awareness of the extent to which the concept of “family” has been and can be used to exploit and/or nullify the needs of women and children» (O'Connor, 1998: 4). Keyes' heroines are all too aware of this change in expectations for women; in *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1996), the title character explains it clearly when she says that the «days of the little woman staying at home and doing the housework in a little cottage with roses round the door, while the man went out and toiled from dawn to dusk, were long gone» (Keyes, 2003a: 302). Keyes also represents the diversity in women's choices regarding family life in contemporary Ireland: in *Watermelon*, for instance, the heroine, by her own admission, is «more of your fifties wifely type» who «was perfectly happy to be a home-maker while husband went out to earn the loot» (Keyes, 2003b: 200). Conversely, Lisa, one of the protagonists in *Sushi for Beginners* (2000), almost divorced her husband because he felt that she prioritised her career too much, while she fumed that he merely wanted her «barefoot, pregnant and manacled to the kitchen sink» (Keyes, 2007: 335), implying that Lisa has no intention of being a stay-at-home wife and mother. *The Brightest Star in the Sky* also refers to another change in family life: that is, that women are now having children later in life and there is now a recognised «a trend of single, first-time, forty-year-old mothers» (Keyes, 2009: 144). Both Lisa's career aspirations and the fact that many women are now having children later in life are feelings which many Irish women can now relate to and clearly represent the changing nature of “family” in Ireland.

## 2. Sex and the Female Body in Ireland

Ireland has long been recognised as being pervaded by a strict puritan morality which was seen to spread itself through a large portion of Irish culture. Popular culture is an example of one area which was hindered by the application of strict censorship laws in Ireland. For example, many books, particularly by female authors, were banned for containing scenes which were deemed morally “unsuitable” for Irish society. For instance, Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girls* trilogy was banned under Ireland’s Censorship Law; *Girls in their Married Bliss*, for example, contains sex scenes «that surely must have stuck in the censors’ craw. Reading them today, one must wonder what all the fuss was about» (Imhof, 2002: 73). Feminist magazine *Spare Rib* was also banned in Ireland on numerous occasions, once because it «showed women how to examine their breasts» (Wolf, 1991: 138), and again «because it carried information on contraception» (Connolly, 2005: 39). Films also did not escape Irish censorship laws as, for example:

*Gone With the Wind* was not screened in the Republic of Ireland when it was released because the official film censor, James Montgomery, required so many cuts that the distributor withdrew it. Ironically, Montgomery vigorously objected to the childbirth scene! Thus, while the state of maternity was formally recognized with the Irish constitution, the embodied processes of becoming a mother –sex and childbirth– were deemed obscene. (Pramaggiore, 2006: 120)

Even the world of sports was, until as late as the 1970s, strictly for men, as «the conservative, Catholic ethos of the Free State effectively removed women from competitive athletic sports» (Hill, 2003: 7) after Pope Pius XI decreed in 1929 that the «violent exertion» and «notable scantiness in clothing» which was associated with women’s sports, as well as the fact of women performing in front of crowds of male spectators, was an unsuitable situation for any woman to be in and still retain her purity and reserve (Judge: 1995).

Much of this censorship was related to the issue of women’s sexuality and the female body, both of which were considered a source of sin in Ireland. Keyes depicts how such traditionally censorious attitudes to the female body have had a type of “hangover” effect on women in Ireland in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; in *This Charming Man*, for instance, one of the protagonists reflects how Irish women often seem to feel embarrassed or overly-critical of their bodies, a fact which becomes more noticeable on witnessing the body-confidence displayed by women of other cultures:

Bell tinged. The arrival of Nkechi. Everyone looked. Plenty to look at. Nigerian, excellent posture, braids hanging all the way down her back, very long legs, then a really quite large bottom perched on top of them.

But Nkechi never tried to hide her bottom. She was proud of it. Fascinating to me. Irish girls' lives were a constant quest for bottom-disguising or bottom-reducing clothing tactics. We can learn much from other cultures. (Keyes, 2008: 32)

It is interesting to note that the protagonist in the above quote notes how many Irish women often try to hide or minimise their curves; in other words, the very aspects of their body that make them look like women. This would suggest that the traditional attitude in Ireland, which likened the female body to a source of sin, may still be impacting Irish women who feel that they may have to conceal their *womanliness*. This is further hinted at in *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1996) when the protagonist reflects how both her lack of confidence in her body image and her deep-rooted "Catholic guilt", similar in that they both reflect Ireland's traditional encouragement of female "morality", have affected her enjoyment of a healthy sex life:

I suspected that if I had big bouncy breasts and long, slender, cellulite-free golden thighs I could have overlooked my Catholic guilt. I would probably have been a lot more likely to confidently hop into bed with total strangers. Maybe sex would have been an activity that I could just enjoy, instead of it mostly being an exercise in damage limitation, trying to act like I was enjoying myself while at the same time managing to hide a bum that was too big, a chest that was too small, thighs that were too... etc., etc. (Keyes, 2003a: 239)

This suggests that the restraints many Irish women feel are imposed on them are still hard to escape. In *This Charming Man*, we also witness the measures that many people still take in order to portray the illusion of leading a "moral" and chaste life, because they believe this is still expected in contemporary Ireland. One of the characters is dating a politician and, although she has effectively moved into her boyfriend's home, he advises her to keep her own home as well and to pretend that she is not living with him, in case the voting Irish public turn against him for "living in sin" with his girlfriend, alluding to the idea that the traditional sense of Irish morality may still be prevalent in many people's minds and therefore still hard to escape:

In actual fact, it had been months since she'd spent a single night in her own house, but *Paddy* said they had to pretend. The Irish electorate was an unpredictable beast, he said: one minute as liberal as you please, the next breathing ire and indignation about people 'living in sin'. In fact, *Paddy* had tried to insist that they *genuinely* live in their separate homes until after the wedding, but this was one issue that *Alicia* stood her ground on. She'd waited too long for him, she loved him so much, she couldn't *not* be with him. (Keyes, 2008: 231)

Irish writer Nuala O'Faolain described Irish communities as being «savagely punitive» and that, for many years, these communities were «fully in the grip of an institutionalized fear of women; that is, of sexuality» (O'Faolain, 2006: 294). This is perhaps unsurprising

when we consider how:

The dominant Catholic ideology of the newly established Irish Free State in the 1920s and 1930s in a sense desexualised women to such an extent that even sex within marriage was considered too risqué for public and often even for private discussion. One consequence of this taboo was that little historical attention was directed towards unearthing the sexual activities of Irish women. (Hayes, 2001: 79)

Ireland's intolerance of sexual diversity occurred particularly in relation to women; since they «were believed to have no sexual desire they were compensated with a superior “moral nature” and a heightened sense of right and wrong in sexual matters» (McLoughlin, 1994: 81). As a result, societal norms vigorously asserted that women should wait until marriage to indulge in sexual intimacy. Of course, this situation was once widespread throughout the world, when it was believed that to suggest «that sex is a desirable aspect of a woman's life, whether she is married or not, presents a significant challenge to traditional morality» (Joannou, 2000: 58); after all, as one of the characters in *The Brightest Star in the Sky* is reminded, «a woman's good reputation is all she has» (Keyes, 2009: 472). Similarly, virginity in females was «valued so highly in many circles that to lose it outside marriage seems a real disaster» (de Beauvoir, 1997: 400). Perhaps this is why, in novels such as *Angels* (2002), the protagonist recalls how her mother takes pleasure in telling people that her daughter married her first boyfriend, implying that her daughter was chaste and virginal, and adhered to the sense of morality encouraged in Irish women, despite the fact that such an implication may not necessarily be the full truth:

He'd been my first boyfriend, as my poor mother never tires of telling people. She reckons it demonstrates what a nice girl I was, who never did any of that nasty sleeping-around business [...] But what she conveniently omits to mention is when she's making her proud boast is that Garv might have been my first boyfriend, but he wasn't my only one. (Keyes, 2002: 2)

Such measures may have been taken to convince people of women's sexual morality because, for women, to possess a sexual appetite was thought to be one of the main symptoms of moral insanity; «it was subject to severe sanctions and was regarded as abnormal or pathological» (Showalter, 2009: 99). However, the feminist movement and the “Permissive Society” of the 1960s was supposed to change this situation, and women «were to gain the “right” to choose sex before marriage with more than one partner [...] and the “right” to enjoy sex» (Whelehan, 1995: 148). As a result, it is often insisted that we «no longer subscribe to the notion of the heated lust of the marriageable virgin» (Greer, 2006: 102). In Ireland, however, the influence of the Permissive Society took longer to be accepted within general society:

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While sexuality came out into the open in other societies, here it remained in the closet. Irish women (and men) have not involved themselves to any great extent in the agonising over sexuality which has occurred in other Western countries. While the feminist literature of other countries has endless dissertations on sexuality, discussion of the subject among Irish feminists was never able to surface into the public domain. (Viney, 1989: 64)

The strict sense of morality which clouded Irish society seemed to equate sin almost exclusively with sex, which, in turn, meant that «Irish social standards and Irish legislation have never embodied principles and behaviours that respect the sexual rights of women» (Corcoran, 1989: 18). Women's sexuality was typically censored and controlled more severely than men's, to the extent that even discussing matters relating to sex was forbidden in many, if not most, Irish households. Such matters were considered so taboo that many young girls were, as a result, not even prepared for the arrival of their periods. In a survey conducted among Irish women regarding such matters:

Only two respondents were told about them, one by her mother and the other by a female cousin. The overwhelming memories of the rest of the women were of being shocked and frightened when their first period occurred and feeling ashamed by the secrecy of the monthly rituals of soaking and washing soiled cloths and towels which had to be kept hidden from male family members. Given this taboo, it is perhaps not surprising that most women reported that they were ignorant of sexual matters during their youth. (Lambert, 2000: 183)

It has been noted that such a marked revulsion for menstruation, as well as society's efforts to keep it secret, is not necessarily a thing of the past; even in contemporary society, «while sanitary pads are publicly displayed in supermarkets and magazine advertisements, menstruation is still regarded as if it were a guilty secret» (Viney, 1989: 60). Keyes directly refers to this in *Last Chance Saloon* (1999), in which one of the main characters, Katherine, explains the 'rules' of creating an advertisement for tampons: «Two hard and fast rules existed for tampon ads: the product is only ever referred to euphemistically; and the colour red must *never* appear» (Keyes, 1999: 59).

When we consider current advertisements for tampons and other sanitary products, we realise how true Katherine's words are. Additionally, it seems to be the case in many tampon advertisements that the women appearing in them are always shown undertaking strenuous physical activity while smiling happily, adding to the patriarchal misconception that menstruation is women's problem and the discomfort it causes should be hidden from public knowledge. However, Keyes not only *acknowledges* the censorship

of menstruation, but also refers directly to it: «The flash of red caught me by surprise. Blood. My period.» (Keyes, 2006: 300). Despite the simplicity of the reference, the very fact of its inclusion is a positive indicator of how Keyes is helping to provide an outlet for the discussion of menstruation in Ireland.

As Irish society viewed sex as a sin, women were only allowed sexual freedom within the confines of marriage, and even then only with a view to conceiving. Even childbirth, with the perceived “uncleanness” of birth, was imposed with purification rituals, such as the ceremony of churching, a type of «blessing after childbirth’ (de Beauvoir, 1997: 178), which supposedly cleansed the woman from the “sin” of having had the sex which resulted in the baby being conceived. As a result, this taboo of the pregnant woman became another area which has traditionally resulted in the repression of the female body. From an Irish perspective, it is ironic that childbirth was so severely censored, when we consider the sanctity of motherhood and the family which was inherent in Irish society. Yet, areas concerning fertility and childbirth were often thought to be «messy considerations which women should confine among themselves (except for the lucrative practice of gynaecologists)» (Viney, 1989: 60). It has been noted how «accounts of women giving birth are rare until the twentieth century and are usually depicted from the spectator’s point of view rather than the mother’s, perhaps from the father’s or someone in attendance» (Joannou, 2000: 45). Additionally, we can be reminded that not only were such issues silenced in the private and public realms, but even depictions of pregnancy and childbirth in the media were censored, as revealed in the earlier quote regarding how *Gone with the Wind* was once banned in Ireland because of a childbirth scene.

Novels, such as *Watermelon*, not only describe pregnancy and childbirth from the *woman’s* point of view, but also present a no-holds-barred account of the affects that they have on the female body, once unheard of in a country which often went to great lengths to conceal the female body:

In fact, it was only a week since I started wearing normal knickers again.  
Let me explain.  
Maybe you don’t know it but you don’t return to normal living and, more importantly, normal clothes the moment you give birth.  
No indeed!  
It’s a long time before certain bodily processes stop. I don’t want to sound unnecessarily gory here but can I just say that I could have given Lady Macbeth a run for her money.  
Don’t talk to me about blood being everywhere, Missus! (Keyes, 2003b: 276-277)

Such extracts are helping to bring women’s issues and experiences into the public arena, a place where they had hitherto been classes

as “taboo”. In doing so, Keyes is helping to normalise women’s bodies and women’s sexualities, a trend which other Irish writers will hopefully continue.

Abortion has been equally problematic in Ireland, if not more so. Induced abortion occurred in Ireland for centuries in an underground manner, and continued until legal abortion was introduced in Britain in 1967, and Irish women began to travel there for safer terminations. A “Women’s Right to Choose” group was set up in Ireland with the aim of devising a strategy to decriminalise abortion and establish a feminist pregnancy counselling service in Ireland. Nevertheless, Ireland has battled with severe censorship regarding the issue of abortion. After the 1983 referendum on abortion, for instance, the Irish national broadcasting station, RTÉ, was banned from undertaking any live discussion about abortion on both radio and television. In addition, this censorship of information included:

The removal of women’s self-help books (such as *Our Bodies, Our Selves*), and even the removal of British telephone directories from public libraries. It also involved the taking of legal action against the Dublin Well Women Centre, Open Line Counselling and the Union of Students because these bodies were seen as providing such information. (O’Connor, 1998: 93)

Such censorship has been reduced in Ireland, as authors such as Keyes can at least now discuss abortion. In *Last Chance Saloon*, for example, Katherine recalls how, when she fell pregnant to a married man when she was a young woman, she felt she had no choice but to travel to England for an abortion (although she miscarried before this could take place). As well as referring to the situation of Irish women travelling to England to avail of legal abortion services, this novel also highlights the mixed feelings that Irish women may have on the topic. Katherine, like many women, was raised to view abortion as a sin, and vocally protested against the campaigns to legalise it; however, when she became pregnant, she realises that it was not so easy to condemn it until she was in that situation and had to make the choice herself, a choice that she would have to live with for the rest of her life:

*Abortion.*

‘You know that I don’t –at least I didn’t– believe in it.’ Katherine couldn’t meet Tara’s eye, as she remembered how, at school, she’d always made mealy-mouthed pronouncements along with the nuns about how abortion was murder, about how no one had the right to deny life to the unborn. But all that had been swept away by the terrible terror that had possessed her. From the moment Lorcan had run out on her she’d wanted to have an abortion. She could see no other way to avoid her life falling apart. She’d known she’d burn in Hell, but she didn’t care. She was in Hell already. (Keyes, 1999: 567-568)



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Similarly, towards the end of *Angels*, we learn that protagonist Maggie became pregnant when she was seventeen years old and still in school. Unlike Katherine, who miscarried before she aborted her unborn child, Maggie did travel to England for the termination. Despite initially feeling ashamed and alone, as if she was the only person to ever have an abortion, Maggie eventually learns that a number of her friends go through the same thing, indicating the frequency that Irish women travel abroad to avail of a legal abortion. Maggie's feelings and reflections on the termination display an honest and objective attitude to the both the decision to have the abortion and to the feelings they may experience afterwards, asserting that, despite what women have been brought up to believe, they should do what is right *for them* as, like Katherine, she realises that no one can decide what is right for another person at a particular time in their lives. The extract also demonstrates that abortions are not only carried out by teenagers and very young women who fall pregnant while still in school or out of wedlock and feel they are too young to cope with a baby, but that such services are availed of by women of all ages and in a variety of personal situations, helping to lessen the stigma often attached to abortion:

For a long time, I was the only person I knew who'd had an abortion. Then, when she was twenty-five, Donna had one and Sinead's sister had one when she was thirty-one. Both times I was called on to relate how it was for me and I told them honestly what I thought; it was their body and they had the right to choose. They shouldn't give any credence to those pro-life bullies. But –at least if they were anything like me– they shouldn't expect to emerge unscathed from the experience, but should brace themselves for fall-out. Every emotion from guilt to curiosity, shock to regret, self-hatred to wretched relief. (Keyes, 2002: 360)

Although the Government has set up the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, which suggests that abortion is at least being addressed in Ireland, whether abortion will eventually be legalised in Ireland remains an elusive prospect. The Irish Government has, for instance, not yet introduced «legislation to clarify the circumstances in which legal abortion may be carried out in Ireland [and] it is widely accepted that this will not be forthcoming in the foreseeable future» (O'Connor, 1998: 52).

Despite the issue of abortion remaining controversial in Ireland, feminist activism and women's groups have undoubtedly helped to significantly improve Irish women's relationship to their bodies. For instance, securing «the legal right to use contraception to plan a family, combined with other factors, has contributed to the quite dramatic reduction in the average size of families that occurred in late twentieth century Ireland» (Connolly, 2005: 54). It is also important to recognise that:

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It is no longer the case that *all* heterosexual acts are categorically viewed as a potential conception, as the Catholic Church traditionally advocated. The pursuit of sex and obligatory reproduction can now, in principle, be treated as two separate matters, both institutionally and intimately, in contemporary Ireland. (Connolly, 2005: 54)

Much of this change has resulted from the decreasing impact and influence of the Church in Ireland; by the beginning of the twenty-first century, «a realignment of the relationship between Church, state and civil society indicated that the Church's authority, particularly on sexual matters, was gradually diminishing, and that a gulf was beginning to emerge between formal religious practice and the activities of everyday life» (Hill, 2003: 5). As a result, views regarding sexual matters in Ireland are increasingly becoming more open-minded, albeit slowly:

From the days of parish priests beating the hedgerows for courting couples when sex outside marriage was the paramount sin, and of women being castigated in confession for refusing intercourse to their husbands, there is now a somewhat more rational view of this human condition and its functions. However, with some people, a certain amount of prurience still attaches to the subject, a hangover from the severe repression of those bygone days. (Viney, 1989: 48)

Such a “hangover” effect from Ireland's days of cherishing sexual innocence may be located in novels such as *Rachel's Holiday* (1998), as, even though women in Ireland now arguably have more sexual freedom than ever before, the notions of chastity and restraint may have been so ingrained in the minds of Irish people that some may still long for this apparently “simpler” time, at least in terms of sexual relations, and some would probably quite happily cherish an element of innocence in their relationships:

We sat quietly and still, Chris's arm tight around me. I closed my eyes and, for a few moments, let myself pretend it was a perfect world and he was my boyfriend.

It reminded me of an earlier, more innocent age, when the most a boyfriend did was put his arm around you and –if your luck was in– kissed you. The enforced decorum demanded by the Cloisters was sweet and romantic. It touched, rather than frustrated me. (Keyes, 1998: 358)

Nevertheless, in the majority of Keyes' novels, most of the characters display a recognition that opinions regarding women's sexuality have changed in Ireland, and while women were once expected to remain chaste, pure and virginal until their wedding day, «now the rule seemed to be that if you wanted to hold on to him you'd better deliver the goods asap» (Keyes, 2007: 228). It is important to remember here that Irish women were once expected to maintain a strict sense of modesty and chasteness, particularly regarding issues such as sexual relation and the body, and that while Keyes' heroines do remember and feel the effects of a country which once treasured

morality, they are also trying to move forward into the more open-minded twenty-first century.

This paper has attempted to outline a number of areas which have affected Irish women, both in the past and still today –including the sanctity of marriage and motherhood and the family, and the female body– and how these same issues have appeared in the work of Marian Keyes: how Keyes remembers Irish women’s oppression in the past and how some of these same issues may still affect some women today. Keyes herself links «her popularity to the fact that she is narrating a different kind of Irishness» (Cremin, 1999: s.p.). Indeed, Keyes’ novels present important memories of the areas which once oppressed Irish women, and how some of these same issues are still inherent in contemporary women’s minds, finally bringing these issues into the public domain.

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