

“Sex and sexuality are ever present in Irish culture”. Discuss in relation to visual culture and/or literature.

In this essay I will discuss how sex and sexuality were/are ever present in Irish culture in relation to visual culture and literature. I will discuss how sex and sexuality were perceived in Irish culture during the early and mid nineteen hundreds due to the influence of the catholic church and compare it to what we see today in Ireland. Touching on how we see/seen Irelands visual culture due to how the societies perceived and displayed sex within irish visual culture and how these different eras influenced this. I want to compare and contrast this topic in different eras in Ireland to display how different societies and social “norms” influenced the visual culture and literature that we seen/see in Ireland's culture.

Back in the early nineteen hundreds Irish newspapers “filled their pages with desertion of husbands and wives and breach of promises to marry” as stated by Maria Luddy and Mary O'Dowd on their article called “ Sex and the Irish: We were always a law unto ourselves on the Irish Times (2020). Maria Luddy goes on to discuss how “Marriage was the most significant institution in Irish society” which we see in old Irish newspapers and other forms of literature from this era. This is the example of an illustration included in an old irish newspaper outlet.



This image displays a widower who is disobeying the “the guidelines of the catholic church” by cohabiting with a woman that is not his wife and the two men on the right display emotions of anger and disgust representing the irish culture and their views on relationships in this era. The use of bleak and cold tones also gives off a sense of sadness in this illustration.

According to Tom Inglis in his analysis of Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sexualit, the damaging effects of the famine had removed the issue of ‘population’ and the habits of that population as a concern for the State. Instead, responsibility for the size of the Irish population and the surveillance and regulation of its practice was assumed by the Catholic Church. The reduction of the growth of the population, in particular, was seen as being ‘at the heart of the modernization of Irish society (and) centred on the strict control of marriage and on a repression of sex outside marriage’ (Inglis 1997, p6). The Church’s response to this was to introduce ‘the systematic ordering and disciplining of bodies in schools’ (Inglis 1997, p11) as well as any other areas of Irish social life within their control.

Within these areas were what the Church classified as “occasions of sin” and any place where a man and woman met socially or in public was seen as being problematic. Public dances were the most common of these occasions and as a result, the monitoring of dances by priests was a practice that became used nationally throughout Ireland. In fact, such was the perceived threat posed by these dances to social order that in 1935 the Public Dance Halls Act was passed to ‘make provision for the licensing, control and supervision of places used for public dancing and related matters’ (O’Connor 2003, p58). The Act provides further evidence of how the Church and State united during this period to construct and manage ‘an ideal Irish body politic...through the shaping and control of individual citizens' bodies’ (O’Connor 2003, 53).

As a result of the implementation of these social controls, late marriage and high celibacy rates became ‘a feature of post-famine Ireland that were supported by the monitoring of relations between the sexes and the control of sexual desire and behaviour by the Catholic clergy’ (O’Connor 2003, p52/3). In fact, so successful were these measures that ‘By the middle of the twentieth century, Ireland had the highest proportion of bachelors and spinsters in Western Europe. It also had the highest level of postponed marriage’ (Inglis 1997, p6). Though attempts to regulate the growth of the Irish population had succeeded, the lasting effect of these measures, and in particular the problematisation of the pursuit of pleasure, the stereotyping of gender roles and the institutional discouragement of self-expression are still resonant in the Irish social and sexual habits today.

This was reflected in the Church’s denunciation of foreign influences such as Hollywood cinema which was seen, in the early twentieth century, as a potential vehicle for social disruption as well as sexual and moral decay. In Sean Crosson’s analysis of the consequences of globalisation for Irish film, he explains this phenomenon using Luke Gibbon’s suggestion ‘that the Catholic Church and political establishment’s fear of film was also to do with the threat film posed to the tight structures imposed on Irish society post independence: Cinema’s capacity to awaken dormant desires was particularly threatening to a rural society that regarded marriage as primarily an economic transaction, a means of securing or consolidating the family farm. For this reason Hollywood’s version of romantic love and tempestuous passions were not simply escapist dreams...cinema flowed into the smallest capillaries of Irish life. Hollywood love did much to undermine the ethos of matchmaking and emotional accountancies that regulated relations in Irish society’ (Crosson 2009, p4).

This resulted in an association within the Irish fascination of ‘sex’ with a negative perspective and caused emotions such as guilt and fear and, as Inglis puts it ‘Along with the curbing of public festivity, fun and enjoyment there was a private renunciation and denunciation’ (Inglis 2005, p23). This accusation and accompanying shame, resulted in the Irish people being influenced to confess, thereby making priests aware of even their most personal sexual thoughts and acts.

As stated by Inglis in fact; 'Confession was the primary means by which sexual discipline and control began to be exercised over Catholics during the first half of the nineteenth century' (Inglis 1997, p11). This practice was further imposed with the strong influence of the Church's status in Irish society in the late eighteen and early nineteen hundreds and by which 'transgressions were identified, monitored, examined and punished' (Inglis 1997, p11).

In comparison to now we see more acceptance of all love in the Irish culture and we see this through our visual culture. Ireland was the first country in europe to legalise same-sex marriage back in 16 November 2015 making Ireland "the first country in the world to do so by popular vote'as stated in the guardian

(H.McDonald,2015) . Love is seen as a happy emotion to share rather than a fear or weakness in contrast to the early and mid nineteen hundreds and this is being shown through Ireland's visual culture more and more frequently. The display of art work around Ireland showing actions and words of love shows Ireland's culture accepting, representing and standing to normalise intimacy in relationships, the LGBTQ+ community and public affection .The tv series 'normal people " is an example of Irelands display of sex and sexuality through visual culture. The series is produced by element picture shown on Hulu and BBC is a series based off the book "normal people" by the author Sally Rooney. This Irish series is "a portrait of 21st century Romance" capturing the intensity of emotions in a teenage relationship from intimate to brutal scenes. The series displays all these raw emotions experienced in love through the exceptional sound track and hugely effective cinematography. The soundtrack is filled with Irish musicians/artists only, giving a sense of home to the irish viewers making the series a more realistic love story, allowing the audience to relate to the series. The music producers maggie philips and juliet markin included irish artists such as the 'soaks' this normalised the show through familiar music we as irish people hear making the series more personal to Irish viewers. This gives the viewers a sense of location rather than a universal feeling. It overall connects you to Marieann and Connal's relationship even more.

The cinematography is raw and almost bleak. The series is shot at angles that you can't fully see what's going on with the main characters marieann and connal. You can't see their facial expressions all the time but this draws you in as a viewer giving you your own perspective as a viewer making it almost a personal experience. The behind the head shots imerge you as a viewer into their world. The series is also split into 12 -30minute episodes pacing the videos full of motion just like teenage love, quick,intense and chaotic. The sex scenes are also intentionally long and raw as judith says"makes the viewer feel like an intruder" on the daily telegraph. These scenes leave you feeling like you are seeing a realistic/ authentic relationship and a "heart wrenching narrative" youtube boy that you can identify with. The series captures such a universal feeling of that 'first love' with its extreme highs and devastating lows but never patronising the key viewers making the series a prime example of sex/sexuality that is in irish culture today.The series even touches base on

how sexual assault is something so airbrushed by ‘just fun’ ‘lad behaviour’ in Irish society in a scene where Maryann is sexually assaulted at a teenage disco. The series really captures what love/sex and sexuality is really like in Ireland due to the society we live in.

In conclusion to both eras we see that sex and sexuality were ever present in Irish culture and it caused for it to be present in our visual culture. As seen in the first era discussed sex and sexuality was present but shown in a more negative light. Sex and being a sexual being was portrayed by the Catholic church as a sin through their paintings and statues inside the churches. In comparison to how love sex and relationships are seen in the era we live in now were sex and sexuality is expressed with so much more acceptance and seen in such a desirable and warm light. Also sexuality displayed through visual culture in Irish culture in the nineteen-hundreds was primarily straight relationships between a male and female and now today we see a huge increase in the display and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ relationships for example Joe Caslin, a street artist painted a mural titled “Love wins” to represent a lesbian couple as part of the same-sex marriage campaign in Belfast in 2015. Joe Caslin has done multiple mural paintings throughout Ireland displaying intimate moments with same sex-couples. Another example of his work is a mural in Dublin done in a similar style to the Belfast mural where we see two young men embracing their love romantically for each other. This mural is found on Dublin’s South Great George’s Street and it was said to have “caused controversy during the Irish referendum campaign” as stated in an article on BBC news. Overall in Ireland whether love was accepted or not or shown for the use of discrimination or unity, sex and sexuality has been ever present in the Irish culture in relation to being displayed in Ireland’s visual culture.

Biography

Inglis, T. (2002) ‘Sexual Transgression and Scapegoats: A Case Study from Modern Ireland’ *Sexualities*, 5(1), p5-24

Inglis, T. (2005) “Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland” *Éire-Ireland* 40.3&4 p9-37

Inglis, T. (2008) *Global Ireland: Same Difference* New York: Routledge

O’Connor, B. (2003) “Ruin and Romance: Heterosexual Discourses on Irish Popular Dance, 1920-1960” *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 12(2), p50-67

O’Connor, P. (2008) *Irish Children and Teenagers in a Changing World: The National Write Here, Write Now Project* Manchester: Manchester University Press

Crosson, S., (2009) ' Vanishing point: An examination of some consequences of globalization for contemporary Irish film". Luke Gibbons, Keynote address, "Technologies of Desire: Media, Modernity, & Sexuality in Recent Irish Cinema," Irish Film: A Mirror Up To Culture Conference, The

VFH Center for Media & Culture, Charlottesville, Virginia USA, 10 May 1996

McDonald, H., 2015. *Ireland becomes first country to legalise gay marriage by popular vote This article is more than 5 years*. [online] The guardian. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/23/gay-marriage-ireland-yes-vote>>.

Luddy, M. and O'Dowd, M., 2020. *Sex and the Irish: We were always a law unto ourselves*. [online] The Irish Times. Available at: <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/sex-and-the-irish-we-were-always-a-law-unto-ourselves-1.4349774>>.

BBC. 2021. *Same-sex marriage: Joe Caslin brings mural campaign to Belfast*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-36933363>>.