

Sexuality and Eroticism in Kate O'Brien's Novels: Mary Lavelle, That Lady and As Music and Splendour

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Abstract: *This article aims to investigate questions concerned with sexuality and eroticism in Kate O'Brien's novels – Mary Lavelle (1936), That Lady (1948) and As Music and Splendour (1958) – recognizing that her feminine characters are individuals who disarticulate prejudices and stereotypes, opening up new possibilities for new subjects with personal autonomy, so that they can fulfill their own desires and needs.*

Living in a world in which identities are often in crisis and constantly undergo the process of fragmentation and discontinuity as part of the dynamic of transformation of modern society, we cannot speak for very long, or with precision, of one stable identity. Instead, we should think of identity as a production of the positions we have constructed and are constructed by the Other. That is to say, identity is not a fixed essence at all, but is constituted within representation, as Stuart Hall states.

To deal with feminine sexuality and eroticism in this beginning of XXI century does not seem to meet the same degree of public resistance as in the beginning of the previous century. It does not mean that the subject matter was erased from our everyday lives before that time. On the contrary, reality intruded abrasively into our dreams and lives, breaking on the barriers of prejudice and resistance. As a matter of fact, if we go back in time and examine the history of humanity, we will certainly encounter attractions and wars between the sexes, conflicts between gender and sex, scenes of idylls between lovers and waves of sexual scandals involving divinities, kings, queens and famous writers. We could list here many famous people who are part of our history and who shocked humanity with their improper sexual behavior, such as Adam and Eve, Mary Madeleine, the goddess Aphrodite, Anthony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Caligula, Henry VIII, Casanova, Oscar Wilde and Virginia Wolf. It is worth remembering that for thousands of years civilizations and ancient cults considered Mother Earth or the Great Goddess as supreme beings. Those cultures took into account the mystic adoration of

sexuality, fertility, death and rebirth as the central axis of the universe. As the biological dynamic of reproduction was still slow within those cultures, the interaction between the essence of masculinity and femininity was the matrix strength which energized their mysticism and philosophy. It was with the advent of Christianity that man's attempt to sustain a position considered correct according to current moral patterns came about. Christian patterns inevitably led women to abdicate their sexuality in order to be respected. The adoration of the Virgin Mary was the way out which helped them to negate their sexuality and independence, precipitating them to subservience to male power and control. At that time, the sexual life of those individuals was controlled by their male dogmatic principles. Thus, the Church can be identified as one of the main institutions responsible for the stereotypes which women have carried for all their lives, such as their lack of intelligence, reason and responsibility as well as other disparaging qualities.

Within the XX century, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical studies based on associations between sexuality and pathology had broad and obsessive repercussions. His justification that mental illness comes from sexual repression and traumatic experiences in childhood can be analyzed as a byproduct of his time in conjunction with his own personal history. The contribution of this Viennese physician's investigation in the field of human behavior was undoubtedly of vital importance to the beginning of discussions about sexuality. Further research within the same area followed, such as that of his disciple Carl Jung (1875-1961) (1980, 25-6). However, Jung's ideas took a different direction, for he considered his master's view-point on sexual impulses and libido reductionist and limiting. Rejecting Freud's scientific rationalism, Jung proposed that all human experiences originate *a priori* in the mind, which in turn translates, filters, allegorizes and falsifies the images. The mind houses a world of images that offer an ambiguous language to be deciphered. Although irrepresentable, their effects can be visualized. Those images which are present in individuals' minds are called *archetypes*. Jung not only wanted to reconstruct and recover primitive human beliefs but also to present a new scientific approach to the development of the human psyche. In other words, he wanted to give credit to the fact that conscious mental roots lie in unconscious archaic material. As we see, whereas Freud based his work on sexual theory and saw the unconscious as a kind of repository of repressed sexual desires, Jung considered the unconscious a matrix from which the conscious material springs.

The sexual revolution in the Western world in the 1960s, particularly with the advent of the contraceptive pill, provided a new road for feminine sexuality. Women could then enjoy their sexual freedom without the fear of pregnancy. The fast global diffusion of radio, television, and other communication media had far-reaching practical effects and helped to re-interpret concepts of gender, sex and sexuality in novel ways. The concepts of feminine, masculine or other intermediate positions underwent modification for they now depended on socio-cultural interpretation. Sexuality became unquestionably connected with procedures, rules and psychological transgressions rather

than with the process of interpretation of the sexual orientation libido. Accordingly, a growing number of societies had to revise old-fashioned stereotypes of gender, sex and sexuality. Thus, history teaches the lesson that social order and the knowledge which individuals need to play their part in the world depend on their actions and are in accordance with their needs.

Starting from the point that nothing is static, correct, real or stable, we reach the conclusion that everything is susceptible to change and may be seen in different perspectives. Given this premise, it is easy to understand the constant changing of individuals' sexuality. It is a dynamic process, although they may not be aware of what is happening. Feelings of regret and shame related to sexuality which may pursue individuals all their lives may be interpreted as a product of their societies. For example, the limited sexual freedom of women in patriarchal societies – a way to limit and control women's circulation and power, keeping them slaves in the domestic sphere. Gays, lesbians and other minorities in gender and sexuality have also for a long time suffered discrimination and punishment for crossing the boundaries of the heterosexual norms of their societies.

It is impossible to discuss the theme – sexuality and eroticism – without including sex and gender. Sex, gender, sexuality and eroticism are parts of the same identity of the individual. They have been components of personal identity since time immemorial. These parts have, naturally, undergone modification and adaptation according to individuals' perspectives, time and place. Alongside these constituent chains, we have family, culture, religion, national pride and profession as relevant parts of the overall composition.

The theme – sexuality and eroticism – comes into play here on account of the amount of erotic representation that pervades Kate O'Brien's text. Scenes of bullfighting in *Mary Lavelle* (1936), the sensory elements which enter into the description of Ana Mendoza's room in *That Lady* (1948), together with the themes of opera in *As Music and Splendour* (1958) illustrate the question raised here. These erotic motifs which O'Brien imports from other cultures or which are part of the individuals she creates have the function of making absolute and dogmatic concepts relative, prompting debate about prejudicial and censored representations.

By dealing with sexual identity, we ally our thoughts to those of Lynne Segal in *Sexuality, Identity and Differences* (1999) to sustain the idea that gender and physiological features help to define the differences between "masculine" and "feminine". For her, identity is in the first instance a category of gender, but its characteristics derive fundamentally from the difference of sexuality between "masculine" and "feminine" genders. Needless to say, fixed and acceptable patterns of behavior and desires within the norms of heterosexual societies are the only ones expected to be followed. Psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and, more recently, the "queer" theory have resisted beliefs in stable sexual behavior and desires, considering that sexual life and social codes are constantly assaulted by conflicts, contradictions and fluidity. These different

and contradictory readings of sexuality give birth to differing thoughts on the matter. The feminists, for example, consider sexuality a means by which men can control women's bodies and pleasure. The Foucauldian perspective, in its turn, adopted by gay and lesbian theories, suggests sexuality to be the ideal site to regulate and control social precepts, mainly those which are in charge of maintaining the family unit as the reproductive nucleus.

It is also relevant to remember here that the Victorian Age was a period strictly marked by the dichotomy of gender within its society. That is to say, the unequal and ambiguous culture, language and values of that time excluded women from public life, restricting their activities and needs to domestic tasks, whereas men were free to embrace broad perspectives of living, without any criticism or constraint. Thus, holding power and authority, men used to control and oppress their feminine counterparts by silencing their voices and needs. Women's desire in Victorian society was officially classified as abnormal and rare. On the other hand, erotic images of women can be found in the Arts of the time, but they tend to stress the female appetite as obnoxious or unnatural. In general, Victorian women were considered frigid – a situation which demanded medical treatment to correct such deviation. Silence and metaphoric codes replaced their knowledge about sex.

After this brief overview of the issue of sexuality and eroticism, it is time to examine what happens in Kate O'Brien's novels. First let's consider *Mary Lavelle*. Written a year before De Valera's Constitution, this novel interrogates the premise of that document which restricts women to the domestic sphere, whereas allying the heterosexual desire to the homosexual one, as both belonging to the same source. O'Brien's women are aware of their desires and enjoy the eroticism which comes from them, without being inhibited by the burden of sin. Mary and Juanito as well as Agatha and Mary are impossible relationships within the moral parameters of patriarchal society, but their desires are clearly manifested without the subterfuges of prejudice. The representation of Mary's and Agatha's sexual desires bursts into the story's narrative as natural impulses, questioning the Irish conventions which laid down the role of mother and wife to women. The same natural treatment of the theme also happens in *As Music and Splendour*, when Clare declares her love for Luisa, as well as in Rose's heterosexual choices and Luisa's bisexuality. The eroticism which gives life to the representation of their desires is verbalized or expressed through voyeurism or metaphors.

Eroticism in O'Brien's novels is revealed as a kind of stimulus to sensibility and emotions. It is manifested in the body as a natural urge of being human, independent of moral values, laws and cultures. The body is the "locus" through which the individual exposes to others and to him- or herself what he or she feels, as well as the way to act in the world. What one person considers erotic another may not, but rather considers it silly or unappealing. Thus, the determinants of eroticism are arbitrary, contingent and may change from one individual to the other. In O'Brien's novels, eroticism is a recurrent element and is expressed in different ways. Looks, sensory images, words verbalized or suggested are forms of representation of eroticism in her work.

The fire of eroticism in *Mary Lavelle* concentrates its power in heterosexual passion, spreading sparks no less dazzling among individuals that share the same feelings within the same sex. The look full of desire which Agatha Conlan, the Irish “mannish girl” (the stereotype used by the narrator to describe lesbians’ features), admits and assumes to be directed towards Mary since the first time she saw her, cannot be analyzed within the same pattern as Juanito’s, the girls’ brother of whom Mary is the tutor. O’Brien makes it clear that both are possible and natural. However, whereas the former is cloaked with desires for control and power, the latter is characterized by comprehension, abnegation and renunciation.

The spectacle of the bullfight in *Mary Lavelle* can be considered the most vivid, dynamic, seductive and terrorizing manifestation of eroticism. Bullfighting is thought to be not only a sport, but also a military art of the Spanish tradition, in which the main actor is not the bull, but the bullfighter or *matador* – the national idol or hero. O’Brien enacts the bullfight scene as an extravagant and foreshadowing metaphoric representation of sexual intercourse between Juanito and Mary. The narrative web of the ceremony, the characters’ emotions, excitement, curiosity and apprehension before the spectacle of the bullfight, as well as the pronounced sense of smell which comes from the environment of the “Plaza de Toros”, are entwined in a range of voluptuous eroticizing apparatus, preparing the reader for the moment when Mary will be facing her personal battle field, her own sexual desires, in short, her alterity. The juxtaposition of denouncing phallic elements and actions, such as horses, swords, the bull itself and the pouring blood complete the representation of sexual intercourse in the dramatic brutality of the bullfight:

The matador drew his enemy to his breast, and past it, on the gentle lure; brought him back along his thigh as if for sheer love; let him go and drew him home again. He took the bull’s blood on his coat, but never looked up out of his zone of silence to advertise the decoration. Again and again in classic passes he allowed the horn to skim him, then drawing back from the great, weary but still alert antagonist, he profiled and went over the horn, as gently as an angel might, to kill. The sword sank where the stud ribbons fluttered, in to the hilt, as bravely driven as if the dealer believed himself to have dipped in Achilles’ river [...] He stood, his muleta almost furled, very closed to the bull’s shoulder while it staggered to its knees, and tried with savage nobility to rise again. But this bauble, this gleaming hilt among the ribbons, darts and streams of blood, was the last honour. He rolled over, dead, and the matador stood unsmiling at his side (114-115).

The dramatic act of the mutilation of the bull’s body does not represent, in a symbolic way, the mutilation of the heroine’s body, but rather the mutilation of her own identity. Similarly, the death of the bull metaphorically implies the end of a life cycle – a phase of change and transformation from innocence and ignorance to one of knowledge and maturity. Knowledge here is not only concerned with the new country – Spain – and her experiences there, but is also related to her inner world, the dark side of her

unconscious universe, which, according to Carl Jung, houses our most hidden and repressed desires, taboos and frustrations. Thus, the writer's fascination with the issue of subjectivity and identity does not seem to be different from many other Irish female writers, and it happens with the opportunity she offers her heroine – the dialogue with differences, with alterity.

In *That Lady*, O'Brien turns her back on Ireland when she once more chooses the same foreign country – Spain – as the scene for another novel. The fascination for the Other – the different – appears as the *leitmotiv* for the construction of the heroine's identity. Here the reader meets the most mature of O'Brien's heroines, Ana de Mendoza – one who does not repress her sexuality, but leaves her free to make her own choices, resisting the absolutist monarchy's oppressions and demands. This is clear when she is married to Ruy Gomez, the King's secretary, and later, after his death, when she engages in a love affair with a married man (ironically, another king's secretary). Ana believes that her attitudes are true and natural, subverting the moral conventions of her time. In doing so, she converts public demands into private ones. As we can see, whereas Ana verbalizes and feels free to welcome her erotic desires, entwining them with care and charity, the anti-hero, King Felipe II, silences and suffocates the passion he feels for her. The despotism of his power and the Puritanism of his religious conventions are above his individuality. The eroticism of the novel comes not only from Ana's awareness and acceptance of her own sexual energy, but also from the sensory resources that the intruding narrator uses without evincing any prejudice.

In analyzing *As Music and Splendor* in the light of eroticism, the reader will certainly note that the erotic desires of the characters blend harmoniously with the operatic production – the backbone that sustains and advances the story plot – as a result of the complex interaction between nature and culture. The sexual leanings of the main characters – Clare, Rose and Luisa – interact with the specificity of their vocal talents as well as with the musical pleasure that their performances exert upon themselves and their audience. Lovers' dates, sex and eroticism – favorite themes in literature – become the motto for the operas. The pronounced exuberance of the singers' physical features, often characterized by abundance of breast and body, alongside voices which aim to reach auditory zones never previously explored (notes that cause impact such as the deepest bass notes and the highest sharps, trills, vocalizes, new runs and rhythms) are challenges that demonstrate the author's or interpreter's capacity. Alongside all that hyperbolic profusion of things, strong feelings and emotions burst from their themes, spreading erotic pleasure over the singers that resonates with their audience. As we can see in the excerpt below, this libidinous and intense interaction among singers, themes, and audience is recurrent in O'Brien's novel:

[...] and as the light went out and they turned and ran to their dressing-rooms, hand in hand, they went on singing. The music they both loved had carried them far tonight, together and above themselves. Their descent was slow and

reluctant, and their hands did not fall apart when they paused in Clare's doorway (113).

Here, fantasy and reality meet and continue their existence beyond the text, sometimes blurring the frontier of the extremes. Emotions abounding in passion and sexuality that achieve life in an operatic performance continue in another space – a mythical space – without the farcical and static make-up of the scenic art. In fact, the characters' desires are not fulfilled as we would expect, but rather leave the idea of their true nature, that is they are as contingent and fluid as the Art itself. For example, although Clare holds Luisa's hand when they leave the stage and seem to share together the same erotic empathy of the representation of the opera, they understand that the body's drive and needs cannot be so easily fulfilled as those of the protected world of the Art. Again, it is clear in the text that the lacunar space of desires, where feelings of alienation and decentration connive (O'Brien's recurrent theme) is part of the process of transformation and emotional maturity of her characters.

Taking into account what has been analyzed so far, we believe that there is no space in Kate O'Brien's work that configures a reductionist view of gender. Needless to say, the strategies she uses to represent sexual identity are mere simulacra which inevitably invite the reader to make conjectures, allowing the coincidence of simulated models with the actual ones. This simulation – an aspect which threatens the difference between true and false, real and imaginary – constitutes the worst form of subversion. And subversion seems to be the main concern of the writer. The orbital recurrence of the metonymic model of homophobia and the invisibility of eroticism between women show the writer's strong concern with stating that women are neither submissive to men's control nor vulnerable to heterosexual models, but that they create their own social and cultural space to live their own desires. The web of artificial signs is as authentic as the elements of the real world, so it is difficult to isolate reality from the illusions of desire, leaving space for a hypertext. Thus, it is quite artificial to categorize or label those of her characters that develop desire for the same sex as lesbians, considering only the desires expressed by their body, similar to those of eating or feeling pain. On the other hand, it is rather difficult to characterize human sexuality in precise and definite terms, for there is an infinitive graduation of interests, tastes and wills, which vary from person to person and even within the same person.

To sum up, O'Brien's novels represent the feminine world in a provocative and challenging way. The main characters of her stories neither accept life within the boundaries of the domestic sphere nor within the traditional parameters and expectations of patriarchal society. They resist the models that threaten women's free will, giving rise to more advanced attitudes and behavior. When she inverts consecrated roles by using themes that subvert social order, such as adultery and homosexuality, O'Brien goes beyond the barrier prescribed to women and female writers. Thus, instead of stressing the dichotomist representation between the sexes, which would reinforce

the experience of feminine alienation, she decentralizes and destabilizes the discursive practice of monoglossic voices, stimulating the conclave of those with other ones.

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