

The Presentation of Postmodern Sexuality in Short Fiction

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Abstract

Shifting norms in twentieth century western society, coupled with emerging postmodern thought in the 1960s, radically changed the ways in which people viewed sexuality, gender roles, and the institutions of marriage and the family. The literature of the postmodern era, namely short fiction, also reflects such ideological shifts. Literature is a powerful communicator of the human condition as well as a crucial means for reflecting the customs, beliefs, and norms of a society at the time of its writing. Such evolving differences as were occurring in the realm of sexuality came to be represented in postmodern literature. This thesis aims to further probe the nature of the connection between postmodern literature and sexual codes.

The Presentation of Postmodern Sexuality in Short Fiction

From the 1960s to present day, the postmodern era has transformed and dominated Western cultural self-understanding. As a result of the ideological shift from the more modern wartime mentality, multiple strands of society, from religion to politics, from race relations to sexuality, have been shaped to fit into the mold of the postmodern worldview. Postmodernity is radically different from its predecessors in that this frame of thought champions subjectivity; this ideology completely disregards the notion of absolute truth and allows each individual to claim his or her own relative stance on morality, the world, as well as views of God, the self, and other people. Individuals have been encouraged to reject former conventions, such as social norms or generally accepted moral standards, to embrace some disorienting balance of personal liberty and a claimed tolerance for the choices of others.

Postmodernity reflects the broken state of this world. God created humans to live in perfect community with Himself and with each other. Though there is still evidence of God's grace, goodness, and mercy in the world after the Fall, humans still inherently possess a sin nature and a desire to gratify self rather than to serve and love others well. Postmodern thought simply evidences the degradation and experience of relativity that has come to dominate the realm of morality. Donna Haraway writes in her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" of the postmodern era that "the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us" (607); her provocative essay describes the emergence of the posthuman and the blending of traditional ethical boundaries. Additionally, David Coughlan writes that postmodernism is "anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist; it sees as problematic the question of universal truths, true representation, or absolute reality; it

does not hold with the autonomous, rational subject” (2). One such area of thought that reveals this strong sense of moral confusion and corruption is the arena of relationships and sexuality. Donna Haraway describes the conflicted mentality of the postmodern era thus: “To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God . . . Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many” (619). Throughout the past half century, the prominence of extra-marital affairs, the perversion of sexuality through technology, the skyrocketing divorce rate, and an increasing embrace of autonomy all reveal the confusion surrounding self-sufficiency that Haraway describes as manifest within the sexual arena. Such ideas are often expressed in short fiction, a common literary medium of this era. Short fiction provides authors with a condensed canvas upon which to examine abstract postmodern values in a realistic atmosphere, often jolting readers into a new way of perceiving the world. This thesis will explore the impacts of postmodern sexuality through the lens of six different short stories from the postmodern era.

Short Fiction

The short story gained popularity throughout the twentieth century and continues to hold a great deal of influence in the literary canon and in literary studies today. Much literary short fiction draws on the codes of realism, investigating the lives of ordinary people and painting them in great detail, in a manner that is relatable and impactful to readers. Rather than appealing to universal, over-arching themes and stories, the literature of postmodernism represents a shift toward the individual and an overall, ““incredulity towards metanarratives,” a designation coined by Jean-François Lyotard (Coughlan 2). Short fiction includes various subgenres often associated with various types of genre

fiction, such as science fiction. As articulated by Coughlan, postmodern art often employs “pastiche” tactics and “encompasses a remarkable variety of styles, blurring the distinction between high and mass culture as it incorporates cultural products traditionally excluded by the academy” (4). As an overall genre, short fiction, a genre so often grounded in realism and the mundane, has ironically become popularized in an era that champions relativity and subjectivity, more abstract concepts. However, much of the compelling nature of short fiction may be due to this juxtaposition of realism and postmodernity, creating a current of unresolved questions in the midst of the currents of everyday life. In his article “Fiction: The 1960s to the Present,” Jerome Klinkowitz discusses the “powerful impact” that the literature of this era has on its readers (335). He writes of postmodern fiction that it “raise[s] the level of discourse to heights that provide encompassing perspectives” (335).

Short fiction, because of its surface-level ordinariness and its bend towards realism, has great power to appeal to readers and to draw them in. Since readers are often put in a place of being able to relate to the plot and characters of such stories, they can read through them quickly and easily. Thus, readers can expend more time and mental energy on the more poignant, underlying questions that a work presents. Though Coughlan argues that postmodern works of fiction “have become metafictional works, fiction about fiction” (4), short fiction tends to be rooted in everyday life while containing underlying metaphysical concepts. Short fiction does not outrightly explore or reject metaphysical ideals. The six short stories that this thesis will cover span the years 1963 to 2005 and are thus representative of the postmodern era; they include “Sexy” by Jhumpa Lahiri, “1-900” by Richard Bausch, “Poor Devil” by Charles Baxter,

“Convalescing” by Joyce Carol Oates, “A Temporary Matter” also by Lahiri, and “To Room Nineteen” by Doris Lessing. These stories draw heavily upon the realistic tradition, often presenting ordinary people and their lives. Given the more commonplace nature of the plots of such stories, the reader is then forced to grapple with such questions of human relationships, sexuality, companionship, and autonomy, thus providing short fiction with a greater sense of power and depth.

An Overview of Postmodern Sexuality

The postmodern era brought with it a great deal of change. In addition to the increasing prominence and influence of the short fiction genre, sexual mores also underwent a major shift at the beginning of the postmodern era in the 1960s. Marriage and its place within Western culture, specifically in America, has evolved through multiple stages over the past few centuries. Lamanna, Riedmann, and Stewart define such stages in their textbook *Marriages, Families, and Relationships: Making Choices in a Diverse Society*. They state that in early America, sex and marriage were dominated by the patriarchy; men would control women and their sexuality and pursuing sexual relations both inside and outside of marriage. The patriarchy caters to fulfilling male sexual needs and ensuring the lineage of the male line (Lamanna et al. 84). Marriage was largely institutionalized, comprising the foundation of Western society for decades. Lamanna and her colleagues describe the transition from institutional marriage to companionate marriage in the 1920s. While men and women had previously shared in some of the responsibilities of providing for their household, companionate marriage in the 1950s highly valued “emotional satisfaction” and friendship in marriage, as well as the prominence of “the single-earner, breadwinner-homemaker marriage” (Lamanna et

al. 173). Later in the twentieth century, sexuality again shifted, becoming more expressive, viewing sex as “basic to the humanness of both men and women; there is no one-sided sense of ownership” which fosters intimacy and pleasure for both parties involved (Lamanna et al. 85). The role of sex in relationships throughout the course of American history has therefore moved from institutional to companionate, to one of the celebration of pleasure as its primary *raison d’être*.

Pleasure, Liberation, and the Pill

From the 1960s forward, the sexual revolution brought about a widespread acceptance of sex primarily for the purpose of pleasure in western culture (Lamanna et al. 85). Marking a change from eras past, postmodern sexuality embraced the meeting of sexual needs for both men and women alike. One such factor in facilitating sexual pleasure for both parties was the embrace of spontaneity within sexual relations (Cocks 117). Both parties felt an increasing freedom within sexual intimacy, a more novel phenomenon especially for women. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, namely the second wave of the feminist movement and the Free Love movement, championed individual freedoms that every human supposedly inherently possesses. Additionally, further social pressures such as the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War stoked the flames of postmodern radicalism. Such a liberationist mentality bled over into the sexual and relational realm, allowing each person to embrace sex for personal gratification both inside and outside of marriage. The notion of exclusivity within marriage continued to decline as the embrace of sexual pleasure spread to an even wider audience as both genders were now included. As Donna Haraway writes in her “Cyborg Manifesto,” “This chapter is an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and

for *responsibility* in their construction” (604). As pleasure becomes the sole goal of sexuality, individuals must decide how to fulfill themselves.

With the pervasiveness of sex for pleasure came the newfound prevalence of more effective contraception, specifically the birth control pill, which served as an additional factor in this postmodern liberationist mentality. This pill allowed women to, for the first time, “separate sex from childbirth,” which gave them “a degree of sexual freedom that the sex radicals of the 1920s could only have dreamed of” (Coontz 254). In his book *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis discusses the potentially bleak moral implications that accompany contraception. He writes, “. . .the modern situation permits and demands a new sexual morality . . . For of course sexual desire, being instinctive, is to be gratified whenever it does not conflict with the preservation of the species” (45). Lewis warns of the ethical confusion that can result from esteeming self-preservation over other values, such as integrity, respect, and justice that do not come as natural to humans (45). Despite possible moral and ethical concerns associated with contraception, millions of American women began taking the birth control pill in the 1960s and 1970s; thus, the birthrate dropped dramatically, and sexual freedom reached an all-time high (Coontz 254). In the 1950s, as premarital sex became increasingly prominent, though not largely accepted by society, women were the ones who set boundaries on sexual behavior; women of the 1950s made clear to their significant others the expectation to marry upon pregnancy (Coontz 254). With the pill, though, this standard disappeared and allowed for a more relaxed role for women as sexual partners. Pleasure dominated sex in the 1960s.

Individualization and Deinstitutionalization in Marriage

Though the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s eventually brought about a radical ideological shift, this change in social behavior was still rather gradual. For example, Coontz writes that “by the end of the 1960s most women still did not support even the more moderate ideas of women’s liberation” and that most women of this era believed that “the best marriage was one in which the wife stayed home and only the husband was employed” (249). Though the majority’s view of gender and marital roles began to shift later in the postmodern era, closer to present day, the social movements of this era did mark the beginning of the dismantling of the marital institution. Largely due to such social movements, marriage itself came under severe critique (Coontz 248). Individuals began to view the ability to publicly declare one’s love for another person in a marital context as a fundamental human right which the government and legal system had no responsibility to regulate or legislate (256). Additionally, the blurring of the definition of legitimate and illegitimate (257) as well as a growing acceptance of singles (262) dislodged the place and diminished the prominence of the heterosexual married couple in society. As marriage was deinstitutionalized, it also grew to be largely individualized. Lamanna and her coauthors investigate this growing tendency towards individuality within marriage. They define this phenomenon as a more prominent societal view of marriage as optional, as including flexible and negotiable spousal roles and the expected rewards of “love, communication, and emotional intimacy,” and as existing “in conjunction with a vast diversity of family forms” (Lamanna et al. 174). Rather than viewing marriage as an established social institution, newly postmodern individuals began to see marriage as an exchange allowing for self-gratification, as a fundamental, yet entirely optional, human right, and losing its place as the foundation of society.

Such attitudes are unsurprising when viewing the world from a Christian perspective; it is riddled by sin, pain, selfishness; it is imperfect and “groans” with the longing to be made new by its Creator (Romans 8.22). Given the fallen nature of humanity, each person is prone to seek self and to gratify his or her own desires above those of other people. The development of postmodern relationships reflects this phenomenon. As marriage relationships have begun to become increasingly individualized and to receive less societal recognition and prominence, our historical moment increasingly serves as a reflection of the sin nature in which all people are partakers. Lamanna and her colleagues summarize this tendency towards selfishness in relationships as follows: “American culture was becoming ‘narcissistic’: Individuals appeared less focused on commitment or concern for future generations” (174).

Extra-Marital Affairs

One such manifestation of an ever-increasing cultural and relational narcissism is the prevalence of extra-marital affairs. Though marital infidelity has existed for millennia, postmodern culture has almost come to condone such a tendency, not necessarily embracing it, but by presenting it continually in various forms of media. As something is presented repeatedly, its consumers become increasingly numb to it. Such a cultural desensitization to extra-marital affairs has brought about a decreased commitment to exclusivity in marriage. The Bible often describes the standard of monogamy and fidelity that God put into place when He founded the covenant of marriage. For example, in the book of Song of Solomon, a book of love poetry, the speaker emphasizes her exclusive relationship with her beloved three times throughout the book (2.16, 6.3, and 7.10). She repeatedly proclaims, “My beloved is mine, and I am

his . . .” Jesus also emphasizes the critical importance of marital fidelity. In comments directed towards married couples, He states, ““So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate”” (Matthew 19.6). God’s design for marriage is for exclusivity, for two people to become one flesh and to cleave to one another for a lifetime. However, given the inundation of depictions of affairs in the media and in literature, film, and other media, Western culture has generally become indifferent to the corruption that marital infidelity has been introduced in contrast to the original design for the marriage covenant.

Extra-Marital Affairs in “Sexy”

Short fiction has become prominent in postmodern culture and therefore functions as rather emblematic of this era’s views on sexuality. One such story that serves to exemplify the above standard of postmodern sexuality, an increasing apathy towards extra-marital affairs, is Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Sexy” from her 1999 short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. Bahmanpour considers “Sexy” to be “the most thematically different and yet significant story of Lahiri’s collection . . .” (48). This story presents an affair between the young Caucasian female protagonist, Miranda, and an Indian man named Dev. Though Miranda learns early in the story that Dev is married, she instantly and irrevocably finds herself drawn to him. Upon first seeing each Dev, “Miranda didn’t know what she wanted. All she knew was that she didn’t want the man to walk away” (Lahiri, “Sexy” 86).

There is an element of seduction present between Miranda and Dev that dominates the tone of the entire story. Miranda and Dev’s mutual fascination with each other’s cultural differences fosters an overwhelming sex appeal that outweighs the moral

concern or consequences of having an affair. Dev's wife is out of town, and Miranda feels that "Somehow, without the wife there, it didn't seem so wrong" (88). The pair immediately attempts to connect emotionally, revealing their loneliness to each other; they relate to each other from the beginning, becoming so intimate so quickly that their relationship is practically doomed to crash and burn. Christopher Apap describes Miranda and Dev's affair as "both public and private" (56). Apap specifically highlights the pivotal scene in which Miranda and Dev go to the Mapparium in Boston and whisper intimate things to each other across an acoustically-enhanced room. He writes that this scene "symbolizes the affair" in that it reveals both the sexual and cultural tension between Miranda and Dev, again reinforcing the simultaneous attraction and distance between the pair (Apap 56).

The affair between Miranda and Dev originally has so much appeal because of the vast and intriguing differences that define their relationship. Apap goes on to state that the pair is "separated by ethnicity, gender, experience, and marital status . . . physically and symbolically at odds with one another" (56). This relationship, at least from Miranda's standpoint, possesses sexual, moral, and cultural tensions that initially intrigue the couple yet do not prove strong enough to keep them together. Though Dev and Miranda are initially infatuated with one another, they objectify rather than genuinely appreciate one another. This attempted blending of cultures that Miranda and Dev's relationship demonstrates also reveals a postmodern sense of cross-cultural awareness. Though Miranda and Dev are initially curious about one another and the differences between them, this initial attraction only leads to self-satisfaction rather than to genuine interest in and care for another human being.

Additionally, throughout most of her relationship with Dev, especially towards its end, Miranda finds herself drifting from the very person she thinks she desires so keenly; she is consumed with guilt over their affair, especially as one of Miranda's friends struggles to console her cousin, whose husband was unfaithful to her, throughout the story's course. Dev, however, remains callously unfazed, content in his weekly meetings with his lover. After each rendezvous, Dev easily falls asleep, yet Miranda is unable to do so. "At the end of twelve minuets Dev would open his eyes as if he'd been awake all along, smiling at her, full of contentment she wished she felt herself" (Lahiri, "Sexy" 94). After Dev's wife returns to town, Dev no longer treasures Miranda, but merely uses her for sexual gratification and to fulfill his need for excitement and change. During one weekly meeting, Dev pays no heed to the lingerie that Miranda has chosen to wear and instead "carrie[s] her to the bed, wearing sweatpants and sneakers, and enter[s] her without a word" (93). Dev, rather than upholding exclusivity, only seeks his own desires rather than solely loving his wife or even Miranda. This extra-marital relationship exhibits multiple tenets of postmodernism. Though Miranda and Dev are attracted to one another, their initial infatuation devolves into a self-serving pursuit. The idea of an affair with a person so different from oneself overshadows the reality of connecting with one another. The pursuits of Miranda and Dev's affair reflect the growing complacency towards infidelity and the increasingly individualized nature of relationships.

"Technosexuality"

In addition to the prominence of extra-marital affairs given more mainstream acceptance, technology from the past few decades has also greatly impacted postmodern expressions of sexuality. Especially considering the widespread popularity that the

Internet has come to enjoy, once socially frowned upon practices such as viewing pornography or partaking in phone sex have become much easier to partake in and to hide. Rather than having to go to an adult store or convenience store to purchase a *Playboy* magazine, individuals can access pornographic content from their laptops, tablets, and smartphones from the privacy of their homes. Haraway discusses the postmodern dependence of industries, the state, labor, commerce, and religion on technology (612). Technology largely contributes to the normalizing of and growing indifference towards traditionally taboo sexual practices. John Wolf wrote his dissertation on this amalgamation of technology and sexuality, calling the phenomenon “technosexuality.” He writes, “it’s already well established that technosexual behaviors are increasingly routine, especially as convergent technologies are made cheaper and, by extension, more available (Wolf 29-30).

As with the increased presentation of marital infidelity, this newer technological ease of access to sexual stimulation has brought about a cultural acceptance of the practice of sexual self-pleasuring. Though pornography exploits those it depicts and dehumanizes all involved, it has come to be widely consumed, embraced, and even made light of and accepted as a rite of passage in mainstream Western culture. Wolf explains that the “convergence of digital technologies, thus, creates new virtual spaces for sexual expression, exploration, and negotiation (29). Phone sex provides a unique take on the perverse availability of sexuality in the technological realm. Judith Roof explains in her article “Phone Sex,” that commercial phone sex “is conducted as a business arrangement in which one person pays another person a prearranged fee for aural stimulation” (1140). Those who provide such stimulation and work for the phone sex hotline, called “erotic

performers, adult phone entertainers, or phone actors,” are paid for their services; phone sex arrangements are considered “mutually consensual” (Roof 1140). However, this calls into question these sex workers’ motives for participating in this line of work: do they accept such a position out of desperation or out of coercion? Or have these people become so numb to this form of technosexuality that they participate in it willingly? Can sexual activity ever truly be devoid of intimacy?

Technosexuality in “1-900”

One short story that examines the concept of phone sex from a creative angle is Richard Bausch’s “1-900.” Bausch writes this story exclusively through dialogue, providing no narration or additional exposition; he transcribes a fictionalized conversation between John, a first-time user of a 1-900 service, and Sharon, a sex actor who adopts the alias Marilyn while working. Bausch also includes ellipses to depict pauses and tension in the conversation. Throughout the story, John and Sharon repeatedly reference the fact that John is paying “ninety-nine cents a minute” for the services that Sharon provides him (Bausch 56). Roof describes this method of procuring payment for phone sex hotlines. She writes, “Some services still employ 1-900 numbers that charge a special, more expensive rate per minute” (1141). John’s request for the direction the phone call takes, though, is unconventional; he tells Sharon about himself and asks her about herself in order to get to know her better so that he can feel more of a “tremendous affection” for Sharon, thus making the process of artificial sexual intimacy between them seem more natural (Bausch 71).

Sharon is quite hesitant at the beginning of the phone call, and she constantly accuses John of partaking in a prank phone call or of trying to acquire a news story. She

ignores John's questions about her life and instead tries to deliver her routine "spiel" and to move onto the next phone call. Sharon is merely interested in a business arrangement, not in engaging with another human being on an emotional level. However, as John begins to share more of himself, his "passion[ate]" love for his children (70), the growing "lethargy" between himself and his wife (58), and his annoyance with his wife's voice and her exasperation with his "convoluted mind" (66), Sharon begins to listen to what John says and to increasingly share more details about himself.

Though Sharon remains cautious throughout her exchange with John, routinely slipping back into calling him "lover" and trying to sexualize an emotionally difficult conversation, John's constant effort to learn about another human's life makes an impact on Sharon. She tells John, her patron, about her parents' divorce, her three cats, her longing for her boyfriend to demonstrate his commitment to her by straightforwardly telling her that he loves her, and her real name. Sharon shares significant elements of herself with someone that she hardly knows, someone who is using her for her services. Though Sharon attempts to remain cognizant of the fact that this is a business transaction, by the end of the conversation she cannot help but be hurt when John switches almost automatically from an emotionally deep discussion to a raunchy sexual conversation.

Towards the end of "1-900," the conversation finally shifts as John and Sharon swap roles: John begins to talk through his sexual fantasy, and Sharon finds herself uncomfortable with sexual conversation and wants to retreat into her more "general talk" with John (Bausch 69). This tipping point occurs once John finally knows that Sharon is invested in their conversation; she involves herself in John's life and gives him advice about how to possibly remedy his difficult situation with his wife. Given the abrupt

nature of this shift, Sharon finds herself “spooked” (71), fighting an oncoming migraine, unable to perform, and questioning the morality of the position in which she has placed herself to make money. Sharon struggles to come to terms with John’s motives throughout the entirety of their conversation; she eventually comes to a point of questioning her self-worth as a person versus her worth as a mere sex object.

The fact that the technological barrier of the telephone separates John and Sharon does not lessen the harshness of John’s one-track desires. At the beginning of the story, Sharon was uncomfortable with the notion of emotional intimacy and wanted to stick to her “safe” norm of providing sexual pleasure through distance. However, by the end of the story, Sharon is the one who becomes uncomfortable with the artificial system that she works for. She shares personal, significant details about herself, and this is not something that she can recover or cover up with a veil of sexual stimulation. Bausch’s story powerfully portrays the deeply human longing for intimacy and the loss of such intimacy and humanity that technosexuality manufactures. In Art Taylor’s interview with Bausch, he quotes Bausch as stating, “To me, it isn’t a question of darkness so much as it’s a matter of faithfulness to the felt life. Fiction is about trouble, and I suppose my interest is in how people contend with troubles that don’t go away or dissolve very easily” (69). Bausch uses his fiction to convey the depravity that has overtaken postmodern sexuality and, more generally, the human condition.

Divorce

In addition to the growing prominence and influence of extra-marital affairs and of technology on sexuality in the postmodern era, the increasing presence of divorce has largely shaped Western culture. Tony Hilfer writes, “Conservatives generally date the

decline of America to the 1960s with the crucial 1970s contribution of the spread of no-fault divorce. The divorce rate did then soar, but was this a sign of an *abandonment* of central American values?" (593). Though no-fault divorce was not officially legalized until 1970 and the divorce rate indeed skyrocketed around this time, Coontz also points to roots of divorce in the 1950s, the period right before the dawn of the current postmodern era. While many tend to point to the threat of the rising divorce rate as the cause for marital discontentment, Coontz argues that "[t]he spread of no-fault divorce in the 1970s and 1980s was more a result of the rising discontent with marriage than a cause" (252). These two factors have often gone hand-in-hand in the postmodern era, leading to a large-scale marital demise in Western society and an acceptance of "divorce as an American value" (Hilfer 594).

Coontz points to 1950s and 1960s women's magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan* or *Vogue*, as a contributing factor in this spreading unease, stating that this medium "nourished a 'discourse of discontent' by promoting intimacy and self-fulfillment as the purpose of marriage. It was by reading about what marriage *ought* to be that many women saw what their own marriages weren't" (252). The postmodern era promotes the pursuit of sex for the purpose of pleasure as well as an elevation of individual needs within marriages. People have come to indulge their innate desires to gratify self, under the pretense of embracing a socially acceptable phenomenon.

This pronounced lack of intimacy within the marriage relationship that Coontz discusses is not something novel. Though women's magazines were the medium that often revealed this discontentment, the absence of complete fulfillment in another person has been present since sin entered the world. When God curses the fallen Adam and Eve

in Genesis 3, He speaks of the relational strain that will plague the world until Jesus' return. To Adam and Eve, God says, "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel" (Genesis 3.15). Additionally, God says to Eve, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you" (Genesis 3.16).

Sin brings forth death, corruption, and the severing of relationships, both between man and God and between fellow men. In Romans 5.12, Paul writes that "just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." Divorce is one such outworking of the relational corruption between humans, namely between spouses. Especially with the introduction of no-fault divorce, which allows for spouses to separate without an accusation of harm done, Americans in the past half century have developed a more blasé attitude towards marital breakup. The divorce rate started to increase again in 1957 in the United States as well as other countries, and this phenomenon has practically been accepted as inevitable (Coontz 252). Many couples today enter into marriage with the expectation that it will not last. The covenant foundations of marriage have been lost in postmodern society.

Divorce in "Poor Devil"

Charles Baxter's short story "Poor Devil" provides a raw description of the pain and wide range of conflicting emotions that accompany the breaking apart of a marriage. This story follows a couple "on their way to a bizarre divorce" as they reflect on eight years of marriage ("Charles Baxter"). The narrator, Dennis, and his ex-wife Emily clean their old house to prepare it for sale. The couple exhibits a wide range of behaviors, from

putting each other down, to pondering the demise of their relationship, to flirting with one another. Dennis thinks, “I am trying to amuse her and irritate her at the same time, so I wink” (Baxter 77). Dennis and Emily work together, reminisce, and spend time together; they discuss their feelings and the shortcomings of their marriage. Though the couple has superficially moved on (Emily has begun dating again and Dennis has been receiving postcards from other women), they still demonstrate some form of love for each other.

Despite current societal views about marriage, God created marriage as a covenantal relationship between two human beings. In Genesis 2, this relationship is described: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2.24). Marriage unites a husband and wife sexually, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and in multiple other important areas. This bond was not designed to be forged lightly. Though much of the seriousness of the marriage covenant has deteriorated in the postmodern era, largely due to the prominence of divorce and the legalization of no-fault divorce, this phenomenon has not changed the fact that marriage was designed to be a lifelong, monogamous, deep bond. Marriage ties two people together, and when these bonds are severed through the process of divorce, scars are left. Charles Baxter’s biography quotes Jeremiah Chamberlin, saying, “Poor Devil” is “one of the most moving stories in the collection, as it shows not only . . . [Baxter’s] exquisite language and his ability to render dialogue saturated with subtext, but also the magic of being able to reveal what it's like to be human.” Baxter’s ability to depict the deeply human desires of his protagonists, namely in their relational longings and shortcomings and in the individualism that has corrupted their marriage, points to the failings of the postmodern expression of sexuality.

Throughout “Poor Devil,” readers are given a look into the desires, recollections, fantasies, and regrets of the narrator regarding his relationship with his ex-wife. For Dennis, the reality of his divorce has not completely sunk in. He interchangeably refers to Emily as both his “ex-wife” and “Em,” demonstrating that he is coming to grips with his new relationship to the person that he was married to for eight years. Calling Emily “Em” reveals a familiarity and intimacy that has not faded and likely will not fade. At the end of the story when Emily leaves the house to go and get ready for a date, Dennis absentmindedly says, almost to himself, ““Good-bye, honey,”” (Baxter 90). At one point, Dennis envisions himself and Emily forgiving one another, expressing their love for one another, and making love on the floor of their empty house. “And as we make love,” he fantasizes, “Emily makes her utterly familiar trembling cry when she comes” (89).

Though the couple knows each other intimately and has a mutuality of love that may never be lost, their marriage has fallen apart. Selfishness, unfaithfulness, and shortcomings in character led to their marital demise. Dennis repeatedly observes that neither he nor Emily feel any sense of remorse over their lost relationship. This numbness and indifference underscores the postmodern unwillingness to emphasize the gravity and joy that marriage was designed to allow for. In hindsight, Dennis realizes that he and Emily truly ““never knew the first thing”” about one another (Baxter 82). Emily longed for Dennis, an artist, to obsess over her and her beauty, to be inspired by her. However, Emily’s pleading with Dennis to be his ““everything”” merely drives him away (Baxter 84). Dennis repeatedly draws another woman, and Emily finds herself insecure and more distant and desperate for her husband’s devotion than before. The lack of exclusivity, increasing numbness, and desperation for unsatisfied satisfaction and intimacy between

Dennis and Emily led to their marital breakdown. "Poor Devil" depicts the numerous, entangled human emotions that result from divorce.

Waning Marital Closeness in "Convalescing"

In addition to the increasing prominence of divorce in Western culture in the postmodern era, as well as the resulting attitude of indifference towards divorce and failure to properly value the marriage covenant, this era also brought about a general waning marital closeness. Though, because of the fallen nature of man, there will never be complete satisfaction and union between two sinners, a pervading numbness and indifference, a refusal to fight for one's spouse and marriage, has enhanced the individuality and waning closeness between spouses. Joyce Carol Oates' short story "Convalescing," like Baxter's "Poor Devil," provides a unique look at a couple struggling with a fading relationship. Though David and Elaine are still married, their relationship was on the verge of ending. Oates provides a unique perspective for readers; David narrates the story, yet it is not clear how reliable a narrator he is. Readers learn partway through the course of David's narration that he had suffered a serious car accident and must recover his memory. David spends the story "convalescing," trying to recover not only his lost memory, but also his relationship with his wife. Especially given the added difficulty of David's mental state, he struggles to process the state of his marriage and his feelings towards his wife. "Convalescing" demonstrates a diminishing marital closeness in what is unsaid throughout the story. Lies, doubt, and infidelity drive a wedge between David and Elaine and permeate the work's subtext. In the midst of this marital strain, rather than retreating from his wife, David demonstrates an anxious attachment toward his wife and clings even more tightly to her. Joanne Creighton describes this short story

collection by Oates, *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories*, and writes, “In this collection sexual love is invariably a compulsive, essentially joyless, terrifying, painful and unwelcome experience. Commonly, Oates depicts a character seeking release from the ‘strain and risk’ of love” (375).

Throughout the course of the story, readers gain more insight into the relationship between David and Elaine. At the beginning of the story, David reflects, ““He was *in love* with his wife but it was a condition he could not feel. From a close, intimate distance he admired her” (Oates 1116). This dual state of numbness and of being in love characterizes David throughout the story. The numbness comes both from David’s amnesia and from his confusion over his relationship with his wife. As David looks back on how his marriage has unfolded so far, he decides that he must have “won” his wife, that she was so far out of his league, that he could not have deserved her (Oates 1116). Later in the story, David recalls the conversation with his wife that served as the catalyst for the strain that remains between them even after David’s accident. Elaine tells David, ““I can’t help it, I’ve fallen in love. I didn’t want it to happen . . . I have to marry him. Can’t I – can’t we – Is it too awful? You don’t want me now anyway, do you, after this? – won’t you want to divorce me?”” (Oates 1120).

Elaine’s perspective reveals a postmodern stance in that she, almost immediately, resorts to divorce as a feasible option, as a way out of her marriage after falling in love with another man. David, dumbstruck, responds numbly, ““You’re in love, I understand. I think I understand . . . I don’t feel anything”” (Oates 1121). David’s accident occurred two days after this conversation. As he struggles to come to terms with his accident, his memory, and his relationship with his wife, David comes to a point of desperation. ““You

won't leave me? . . . You'll never leave me?' He was sweating" (Oates 1125). David, desperate to reconnect with his wife, practically forces her to say that she will be faithful to him. The devastation of trauma, infidelity, and emotional scarring permeates "Convalescing."

Autonomy and Self-Gratification in Marriage

Along with other changes to the status of marriage in society, the deinstitutionalization of the marriage covenant, an attitude of indifference towards extra-marital affairs, the new developments associated with technosexuality, and increased divorce rates, the postmodern era has also seen a rise in autonomy and self-gratification within marriages. Hilfer writes, "Perhaps even more enervating to traditional marital strictures was a less politically defined set of emergent American attitudes" (595). As traditional Western attitudes towards marriage, such as conventional gender roles and the status of the family in society, have grown more relaxed, postmodern thought and a growing lack of commitment have taken their toll on the marriage covenant. Both the perception of marriage in Western culture as a whole, as well as individuals' own views towards their marriage or their spouse have deteriorated into indifference and a lack of commitment and effort. Lamanna and her colleagues quote Coontz in saying "'For better or worse,' over the past thirty years, 'all the precedents established by the love-based male breadwinner family were . . . thrown into question'" (174). Postmodernism calls into question and diminishes the worth of traditions, values, roles, and precedents that had been previously set regarding marriage; as subjectivity becomes more prominent in Western culture, so does individuality and self-seeking. The nature of the marriage relationship has continued to shift over time, given that "by the late 1980s, companionate

marriage . . . had largely given way to its successor, individualized marriage” (Lamanna et al. 174). This embrace of individualization demonstrates a cycle that has come to be perpetuated within postmodern sexuality: as autonomy and a rejection of permanence prevail, the prominence of and indifference towards marital decline abound. Both of these phenomena are linked and seem to cause one another.

In addition to a growing prominence of individuality within marriage, the pursuit of sex for pleasure has also brought about a need for self-gratification, especially sexually, rather than promoting the imperative of pleasing one’s partner. The Bible outlines clearly God’s design for roles within the home and for sexuality. In terms of sexuality, God’s design involves one man and one woman being married exclusively to one another for life. Proverbs 5.19 states, “Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice in the wife of your youth.” This involves a lifelong union, a growing commitment to sexual, emotional, spiritual, mental, and social intimacy, and a delight that only increase as a married couple grows closer together. The Bible also outlines the place of gender roles within the family. All people have been created in the image of God and thus all possess an equally inherent worth and dignity; thus, a husband is not greater than his wife or vice versa. Rather, the husband and wife each have distinct roles within the marriage relationship that ultimately serve to reflect God; a marriage between a husband and a wife provides a picture of the eternal union between Christ and His bride, the Church (Ephesians 5.23).

As Christ is the head of the Church, so the husband is the head of the household. This does not imply a dictatorship, but rather points to a husband’s responsibility to protect, provide for, pursue, and cherish his wife and children. The wife is in a place of

submission to her husband; this is not a means for her to be trampled but instead places her in a position of being cared for. The wife has responsibility as well. Proverbs 31.27-29 says, “She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying: ‘Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all.’” Because of the fallen nature of humanity, these biblical roles will never be perfectly adhered to in this world. However, in their ideal state, such roles have been designed to serve as a reflection of Christ. Postmodernity has largely rejected these functions and instead celebrates their abolition. Rather than leading to marital success, though, this has brought about much marital strife and strain.

Autonomy in “A Temporary Matter”

Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “A Temporary Matter” explores the growing selfishness between a couple struggling with grief. This story is located in *Interpreter of Maladies*, the same collection that includes “Sexy.” This story follows a thirty-something Indian-American couple, Shukumar and Shoba, and the decline of their marriage. Six months prior to the timeframe in which the story occurs, the couple lost their baby to a stillbirth. Shukumar was at a conference when his wife went into labor and by the time he arrived, his child had been born dead. This experience of absence, death, guilt, and regret has come to the forefront in the couple’s relationship. Rather than dealing with their grief and healing together as a couple, these two characters instead isolate themselves from one another. Shukumar has also isolated himself from the outside world. He is on leave from his job, avoids going out of the house to buy groceries, and even has difficulty rolling out of bed in the morning and remembering to brush his teeth. Shukumar is in his sixth year

of graduate school and finds himself left with little motivation. “But nothing was pushing Shukumar. Instead he thought of how he and Shoba has become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (Lahiri, “Temporary” 5).

Shoba, on the other hand, has immersed herself more fully in her work as a proofreader. Even while at home, she sits for hours proofreading files, becoming so engrossed in them that she ignores and even avoids her husband. “They weren’t like this before. Now he had to struggle to say something that interested her, something that made her look up from her plate, or from her proofreading files. Eventually he gave up trying to amuse her. He learned not to mind the silences” (Lahiri, “Temporary” 12). Though Shoba moved forward with her life in the professional arena, she has neglected the care of her household, husband, and appearance. Shukumar has adopted domestic responsibilities as he is the one occupying the house during the day, and Shoba has given herself over to apathy. As is seen in the example of Shoba, Coontz describes more opportunities being made available for women in the educational arena and in the workplace from the 1950s forward. “As women . . . gain[ed] experience at work and school, their personal aspirations and self-confidence grew” (Coontz 253). Though Shoba does not seem to define herself by her career, she does dive into her work and retreat further away from her husband as she struggles to grieve her lost child.

Practices of indifference, of secrecy, and of struggle can clearly be seen in Shoba and Shukumar’s marriage. The premise of “A Temporary Matter” is that for a week, a scheduled power outage each night brings the couple together. As the power is out, they eat in the dark and attempt to engage in intimate, personal, cathartic conversation. This

proves awkward at first but becomes more natural and brings about more healing as each night progresses. Shoba suggests the idea of making a confession to one another each night. These confessions begin rather trivially as each spouse discusses his or her first feelings for the other. However, as the nights progress, the secrets become more intimate; the couple reveals lies, near infidelity, and true feelings. Throughout this process, the couple also begins to be physically intimate with each other again, on one night “kissing . . . awkwardly” and the next night “making love with a desperation they had forgotten” (Lahiri, “Temporary” 19). Shukumar and Shoba struggle to regain intimacy with urgency.

On the night that the power returns, though, Shoba reveals the real reason for “her game” (Lahiri, “Temporary” 21). Shoba announces that she has found an apartment and plans to move out. Shukumar “was relieved and yet he was sickened” (21). Despite the healing that had appeared to take place throughout the story, Shoba had known all along her intentions of separating from her husband. The grief dividing this couple paved the way for a spirit of apathy rather than a renewed and strengthened bond of closeness and mutual dependence. This pronounced numbness within a marriage reveals a pervading postmodern indifference towards the marriage covenant; “A Temporary Matter” comments on such indifference in an attempt to reveal its toxicity.

Self-Gratification in “To Room Nineteen”

Doris Lessing’s 1963 short story “To Room Nineteen” presents the gradual deterioration of the marriage of Susan Rawlings, the protagonist, and her husband Matthew. The narrator begins by describing the decline of the Rawlings’ marriage as “a failure in intelligence” (Lessing 863). Such failings, however, are more than just a reflection of the characters’ lack of intelligence in their dealings with one another, but

also reflect the cheapening of the intimacy that a married couple has had the privilege of sharing. To explain the decline of the Rawlings' relationship, Lessing presents the lack of standards of fidelity with which Susan and Matthew entered their marriage. Matthew returns home from a party one evening and confesses to Susan that he has had an affair. Susan seems to nonchalantly brush the incident aside: "The whole thing was not important. After all, years ago they had joked: Of course I'm not going to be faithful to you, no one can be faithful to one other person for a whole lifetime" (866). From the start of their marriage, the Rawlings had claimed to be unbothered by the prospect of their spouse having affairs. It is also assumed that the couple did not enter their marriage as virgins. Though the Rawlings had claimed to be unaffected by sharing their intimate sexual experiences with others outside of their "big married bed in the big married bedroom," Matthew's first affair after ten years of fidelity clearly places a strain upon the marriage (865). The story's narrator states, "But the incident left them both irritable. Strange, but they were both bad-tempered, annoyed. There was something unassimilable about it" (866).

Despite the surface-level honesty between the Rawlings, such openness lacked depth. Such communication, though frank, may not permeate as deeply as is necessary for a thriving marriage relationship. Rather than using their sexual intimacy as a means for communicating openly with, and for truly knowing one another, Susan and Matthew instead use their sexuality as a merely means to physical gratification. Especially during the time following the affair, Susan feels inadequate in sharing her inner-most feelings with her husband, the one person that she should ultimately be able to trust the most. At the beginning of the story, the narrator depicts the Rawlings' marriage as one that is

firmly grounded in intelligence. Susan's shame at expressing her true feelings to her husband reflects her need to maintain a front of intelligence despite what she deems to be the irrational thoughts that she is experiencing. Susan prefers to bottle her emotions despite the unhealthiness of doing so over sharing herself with her husband. "Above all, intelligence forbids tears" (Lessing 867). When all of the Rawlings' four children have begun attending school and Matthew is at work, Susan is left alone during the day. Susan's instability grows; though her solitude initially oppresses her, she grows to long for isolation desperately. As stated by Eva Hunter, "The 'happy' suburban housewife was . . . miserable, frequently neurotic, condemned to live an emotional and intellectual death" (92).

Susan tries to express her feelings to her husband, and yet thinks, "Why is it I can't tell him? Why not?" (Lessing 871). Matthew briefly tries to listen to his wife and to console her with his words, but he soon realizes that he cannot fully understand what Susan is going through emotionally. Instead of pushing further and attempting to understand Susan's situation to the best of his ability, he gives up and resorts to comforting her the only way that he is good at and knows how to do: "That night, when she had wept and Matthew had driven the misery out of her with his big solid body . . . was a lie, because she had not told him of her real fears at all" (870). Sexual comfort, rather than advancing the cause of emotional intimacy, serves in the Rawlings' marriage as a substitute for in-depth knowledge of the other's emotions, fears, longings, and true selves. "The story begins with a description of Susan and her husband Matthew as a couple who are all that two modern young people of London in the early sixties could be" (Hunter 94). A growing depiction of openness in sexuality with one's partner was

something to be celebrated in the emerging postmodern period, especially during the 1960s in which “To Room Nineteen” is set. The rise in this new manner of viewing sexual relations revealed in the value of pleasure and spontaneity (Cocks 117). As is exhibited by the Rawlings’ marriage, their utilization of sexuality, as promoted by postmodern thought, was for the physical sake of sexual expression itself instead of as a tool through which marital intimacy and deep emotional familiarity can flourish.

As a result of the Rawlings’ lack of true intimacy and inability to genuinely share with one another, Susan retreats into herself. The course of “To Room Nineteen” follows her downward spiral into increased isolation and ultimate suicide. As stated by Glenna Bell, “Doris Lessing’s ‘To Room Nineteen’ is a story of repression, alienation, and suicide. Lessing describes Susan Rawlings’ search for inner tranquility . . .” (180). In turning inward and overly depending on herself instead of reaching out for help, “Susan despairs, and kills herself” (Hunter 94). Hunter specifically connects Susan’s self-imposed isolation to Matthew’s first affair after a decade of marriage, the couple’s failure to discuss the issue properly, and Susan’s attempted repression of her feelings. “Susan, her most intense emotions, hurt, anger, and jealousy, having been denied validity, begins to feel ‘arid’ . . . Susan grieves – for the destruction of her faith in the love she has shared with her husband” (95). Susan experiences the emergence of trust issues in her marriage, and to protect herself from feeling and exposing herself to vulnerability and hurt again, she seeks solace in isolation. Though she is tormented by her own feelings, obligations, and thoughts, she does not have to cope with the in-depth work that is involved in maintaining the intimacy of a marriage because of her self-imposed alienation. Yet throughout the story, Matthew still makes scattered attempts to reach out to Susan

emotionally. “She felt her heart (the old heart of Susan Rawlings) soften and call out to him. But she set it to be indifferent” (Lessing 877). However, at the end of the story, when Matthew confesses that he is having another affair and Susan makes up a lover, they suddenly fall into flirting with each other. Internally, though, Susan is appalled. “Inside she was dissolving in horror at them both, at how far they had both sunk from honesty of emotion” (884). Despite the emerging postmodern celebration of openness in sexuality, the Rawlings fail to communicate openly. As Susan feels the need to repress her emotional responses to her husband’s unfaithfulness, she distances herself, eventually to an irreversible level, and commits the ultimate act of self-isolation in taking her own life. “To Room Nineteen” tragically demonstrates the failings of the postmodern system in fostering meaningful sexual and marital intimacy.

Conclusion

The short fiction of the past half century has served as a mirror of sexual changes that have overtaken Western culture. Postmodernism typifies a moral shift, the celebration of individualism, and the embrace of relativism. The field of postmodern sexuality, though, is far broader than the material discussed in this paper. Postmodern sexuality has also triggered a major change in ideology; traditional values of the marriage covenant, fidelity, emotional and sexual intimacy, and the influential role of marriage in society have fallen by the wayside. Instead, the prevalence of extra-marital affairs, the easy access to sexual content through technology, increasing divorce rates, a pervasive sense of apathy, and a lack of commitment, purpose, and intentionality towards marriage have come to dominate the postmodern Western view of sexuality. Marriage has become deinstitutionalized and individualized. As ideas become more dominant in society, they

often appear reflected in literature, and as ideologies are presented more frequently, consumers come to adopt and even become blind to their influence. Short fiction, of which the above six short stories serve as examples, has both perpetuated this cycle as well as provided space to critique it. Though postmodern sexuality has strayed far from God's original design for the marriage covenant, honestly examining this dismal subject sheds light upon it.

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