

“A SPLENDID FIGURE OF REVOLTING WOMANHOOD”: THE WOMEN OF BRENDAN BEHAN’S SHORT FICTION

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2024.67.6>

Abstract: Following Patricia Coughlan’s prompt to question representations of women in the writing of male authors, this article sets out to analyse the representations of women in the work of Brendan Behan, more specifically his short fiction. As a working-class writer, the issue of the portrayal of his own neighbourhood and community quickly emerged as a central concern for Behan. As Michael Pierson has argued, within the oppressed group of the Dublin working class, it was women who were most at odds with the status-quo, suffering double marginalisation through both gender and class. When looking at Behan’s depictions of women in his short stories, no straightforward conclusions may be drawn. Behan can hardly be classified as a feminist writer, but he treats most of his female characters with similar empathy as he does his male characters, allowing them the capacity to be anything from self-denying saints to “screwy bitches.” Some of his stories are written in homage to the women who raised him, others seem to criticise a society that victimises them.

Keywords: Brendan Behan, working-class literature, short stories, literary representations of women, feminism

Introduction

In her 1991 essay “‘Bog queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,” Patricia Coughlan writes: “I have chosen to discuss the work of male poets, believing strongly that both ‘gynocritics’ – the ‘naming,’ recovery and revaluing of women’s writing – and the persistent demystifying of representations of women in men’s work must continue in

tandem.”¹ Acknowledging the vital importance of this attitude, this article sets out to analyse the representations of women in the work of Brendan Behan, more specifically his short fiction. Two of Behan’s most well-known and critically renowned works, the play *The Quare Fellow* (1956) and the autobiographical novel *Borstal Boy* (1958), are marked by a distinct absence of female characters due to their homosocial prison settings.² While both are inspired by the time the author himself spent in prison between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three, for most of the rest of his life, women played a significant role in both his personal and professional development. Starting from early childhood, Behan was surrounded by strong women. In his writing, it is mainly his paternal grandmother Christina English who emerges as a formative figure. In adulthood, the two most important people in Behan’s life were his wife Beatrice³ and his editor Rae Jeffs, author of *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman* (1966), and creator of the ‘talk books,’ *Brendan Behan’s Island* (1962), *Brendan Behan’s New York* (1964), and *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* (1965), as well as of the collection *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (1963) which included original illustrations by Beatrice Behan. Behan never shied away from working with women in a professional capacity, as his longstanding relationship with Rae Jeffs shows. However, even before she took over the management of his career, Behan’s closest collaborators were women. His first play, *The Quare Fellow*, for instance, was significantly edited by Carolyn Swift of the Pike Theatre.⁴ His English language adaptation of *An Giall, The Hostage* (1958)

¹ Patricia Coughlan, “‘Bog queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,” in *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Allen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997) 185. Essay originally published in Toni O’Brien Johnson and David Cairns, eds., *Gender in Irish Writing* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1991), 41-60.

² Behan’s second canonical play, *The Hostage* (1958), does feature several female characters, a detailed discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article, albeit merited.

³ An accomplished artist herself, Beatrice Behan devoted much of their time together to taking care of Brendan, supporting his career, and trying to cope with his alcoholism. Her experiences were published in *My Life with Brendan Behan* (1973). The importance of Beatrice’s understanding and support cannot be measured in words. In 2023, Behan’s centenary year, author Pat McCabe’s installation *The Holy Hour: Requiem for Brendan Behan* at the Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI) honoured her by including her image as a central part of the exhibition’s artwork. As in life, in an altar piece created by Lucy Smyth, Beatrice is right by Brendan’s side. On his other side, Charlie Millwall stands in for Behan’s work, but also as a reminder of the author’s bisexuality.

⁴ See also James Little’s contribution in the present volume.

was produced with the help of English theatre maker Joan Littlewood. Without these women, the Brendan Behan we know today would not exist.⁵

In Behan's writing, too, there are quite a few significant female characters, as it turns out. In *The Hostage*, for example, women, some of them prostitutes, play a crucial role in uncovering the hypocrisy of their countrymen. As Michael Pierce notes: "like that of the Shakespearean 'fool,' their jest carries some of Behan's most insightful observations."⁶ Behan's only crime novel, *The Scarperer* (1966), also has several important female characters, ranging from the abused police informer Nancy Hand, over a diverse cast of pub goers, to the two ladies who bring about the downfall of the central criminal syndicate, Aunt Jeannie and her niece Nancy. Aunt Jeannie, as John Brannigan indicates,

is a caricature of bourgeois Dublin who is nestled comfortably in southside suburbs, busy with compassion for animals or perhaps even charity for the poor, educated in private schools unchanged by independence, and content with an Irish government which has done nothing to amend the deep social inequities inherited from British rule.⁷

Indeed, portrayed as deliberately obtuse, Aunt Jeannie sets out to uncover a case of animal cruelty, bringing about the solution of the central mystery purely by accident.⁸ Despite her role in solving a murderous criminal plot, she is one of Behan's more unlikable characters, due to her narrow point of view, nostalgia for colonial times, and class position. She stands in stark contrast to the central female characters of stories such as "The Last of Mrs. Murphy" and "The Confirmation Suit," who tend to be quick-witted, firmly placed in working-class settings, and focused on survival, rather than Aunt Jeannie's bourgeois pastimes. It can thus be surmised that women take a variety of roles within Behan's oeuvre, sometimes appearing as the otherwise unspoken heroes of the working class, sometimes as their direct opposites. They are neither idealised nor disparaged, but rather

⁵ Despite this, in popular imagination Behan exists in a world without women, a perpetually drunken pub character moving from one homosocial environment to another. On a walking tour through Dublin in 2022, the present author witnessed the tour guide quipping that no women would go near men like Patrick Kavanagh and Brendan Behan. As shown above, this could not be further from the truth.

⁶ Michael Pierce, "'A dance for all the outcasts': Class and Postcolonialism in Brendan Behan's *An Giall* and *The Hostage*," *Irish University Review* 44, no. 1 (2014): 106.

⁷ John Brannigan, "'For the readies': Brendan Behan, Crime Fiction, and the Dublin Underworld," *Éire-Ireland* 49, no. 1&2 (2014): 102.

⁸ Brendan Behan, *The Scarperer* (London: Arena Books, 1987), 124-50.

portrayed with all the complexity deserving of a group of people who often remain unrepresented. While an in-depth analysis of Behan’s fictional women would surely be fruitful, for reasons of space this article will focus mainly on four of his short stories gathered in Peter Fallon’s collection *After the Wake* (1981). It sets out to explore Behan’s representations of women in order to shine a light on whether the extraordinary insight and empathy with which he approaches his male characters stretches to his female characters as well.

Women and the Working Class

As a working-class writer, the issue of the portrayal of his own neighbourhood and community quickly emerged as a central concern for Behan. After independence, the state’s vision of itself quickly led to attempts at erasing the history and culture of all communities that did not comply with the idealised image of Ireland perpetuated in both the literary revival and the revolutionary period. The urban working class was one of the targets of this unifying mission of state ideology. As Pierse has pointed out, within the oppressed group of the Dublin working class, it was women who were most at odds with the status-quo, suffering double marginalisation through both gender and class.⁹ Moreover, he argues,

[w]hile it is by now axiomatic to observe what Eavan Boland terms the “disproportionate silence of women” generally in Irish literature, the disproportionate silence surrounding working-class women is barely discussed in critical inquiry. [...] An obvious explanation for this particular imbalance is the lack of writing from working-class women themselves, due, in no small part, to the general conditions that the class system imposes on their lives.

(114)

Therefore, instead of reading first-hand accounts of Dublin’s working-class women, scholarship must largely resort to the portrayals of these women in the writings of their male counterparts in order to be able to draw some conclusions about their stories. This necessarily leads to a sometimes-skewed image of their lives, as shown through a male perspective.

Behan’s image of working-class womanhood, for instance, is one that is practical, boisterous, and often drunk. Behan’s women may struggle with alcoholism, a lack

⁹ Michael Pierse, *Writing Ireland’s Working Class: Dublin after O’Casey* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 115. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

of money and resources, as well as the hypocrisy of their society, but they do not face some of the harsher realities that real mid-century Irish working-class women often did. As Pierson points out, “the state’s tolerance for domestic violence” and the fact that “[w]orking-class women were also more likely to be entirely reliant on a husband’s income” (116) meant that if their husbands were abusive, they rarely had the option to leave. Indeed, he argues: “The twin despotisms of social and domestic abuse, as enabled by church doctrine and androcentric statutory control, made life a living hell for many working-class women.” (116) This is not the Dublin working class that Behan describes in his short stories, though. Domestic violence is not a topic mentioned in them, nor are there any women scarred by the impossibility of separating from a spouse, abusive or not. It may be argued that Behan avoids the theme of domestic violence for fear of censorship, but this is not a compelling argument due to the controversial nature of some of his other stories. It is more likely that he cast aside certain issues in favour of a somewhat idealised image of working-class womanhood, inspired by his own upbringing.

The image he consequently creates is an urban archetype put in contrast with the rural ideal prevalent at the time. Coughlan argues that

Irish ideology tends to an idealisation of rural life. This is often centred on female icons of ideal domesticity, especially mother-figures, who are associated with unmediated naturalness. [...] It is also necessary to bear in mind the way ideology has effectively denied women the freedom to develop a fully self-conscious ego and therefore to participate in civil society by allocating them a fixed position within the domestic sphere, and by the celebration of domestic virtues as constitutive of femininity.¹⁰

Behan’s urban rulers of the house are very different from this “ideal of domesticity,” and they are not afraid to make that known. Defining the way Sean O’Casey writes about women, Pierson notes that “[t]he role of women in working-class life as a nurturing and heroic force is strong in O’Casey, to be sure. [...] [W]omen often represent humanity at its best [...]. Yet O’Casey, overall, depicts women in varied and often conflicting forms.” (58) It may be argued that Behan does so, too. Like O’Casey, he depicts women in ways that go “beyond a stereotypically maternal, nurturing role” (59). Refusing to cook, lacking empathy for those outside the community, and generally not the demure, submissive, and pious mother figures that were seen as the norm in their time, they are flawed, yet willing to do anything for those they love. They stand in for the entire community

¹⁰ Coughlan, “Bog queens,” 187.

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in much the same way as the “female icons” (Coughlan’s phrase) of much of modern Irish writing do for rural Ireland, but they do so in a way that shows both the pretty and the ugly sides of that community.

“The Last of Mrs. Murphy” and “The Confirmation Suit”

The first two stories to be discussed here, “The Last of Mrs. Murphy” (1981)¹¹ and “The Confirmation Suit” (1953), are most directly concerned with the working class. What is remarkable about them, in the context of this article, is that they are almost exclusively populated by women. Indeed, seeing as these may be said to be the most autobiographical out of all of Behan’s short stories, it comes as no surprise that their protagonists are closely modelled on those most influential to his childhood self, namely his grandmother Christina and her motley crew of gossip and alcohol providers. As Colbert Kearney outlines, “With his Granny English and her cronies there was no fanaticism or idealism other than in pursuit of a good time and lively company; even her name, English, seemed to mock the patriotism of the rest of his family.”¹² Accordingly, these stories focus on childhood and community, introducing fictionalised versions of the formative characters of a young Behan’s life, most of whom happen to be women.

“The Last of Mrs. Murphy” reveals a preoccupation with gender within its first few sentences:

Over Mrs. Murphy’s bed hung a picture of a person wearing a red jacket and a white head. When I was small I thought it was a picture of herself, but she laughed one day and said no, that it was Pope Leo. Whether this was a man or a woman I was not sure, for his red cloak was like Mrs. Murphy’s and so was his white head.¹³

Blurring gender lines, while also poking fun at his community’s (and his own) devout Catholicism, Behan here perhaps already hints at the importance of figures like Mrs. Murphy and their standing within the community due to their advanced age. Certainly, to the young narrator, Mrs. Murphy is much more real and

¹¹ “The Last of Mrs. Murphy” was, according to Peter Fallon, written in the early 1950s and remained unpublished until his 1981 collection. See Peter Fallon, “Introduction,” in *After the Wake*, ed. Peter Fallon (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2023), 11-12.

¹² Colbert Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 11.

¹³ Brendan Behan, “The Last of Mrs. Murphy,” in *After the Wake*, ed. Peter Fallon (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2023), 16. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

important than Pope Leo. With his mother presumably occupied either with work or younger siblings, the narrator spends a great amount of time with Mrs. Murphy, who looks after him, but also, as time progresses, needs his support: "I walked in front for her to lean on my head, slow and in time with her." (19) Consequently, when she dotes on a new baby in the house, the narrator is upset at having to share the attentions of the elderly lady. However, here as elsewhere in the story, a certain lack of compassion in its central characters is revealed: "cheeks and eyes all full of tears – [I] ran through the hall and out into the street. My mother only laughed and said it didn't mean that Mrs. Murphy fancied the baby more than she did me." (19-20) The child, at five years old, struggles to understand his mother's reaction, instead devoting his attention to Mrs. Murphy's cat, Minnie or, as the narrator calls her, Minnie Murphy, "who, if she was vicious enough to scrawb you if she thought she'd get away with it, didn't make you feel such a fool." (20)

Here, already, we see an image of Dublin's working-class women emerge which shows them to be of a no-nonsense disposition, not overly empathetic, nor emotional. While the story conveys overall a certain nostalgia, Mrs. Murphy herself can hardly be described as sentimental. When, during a discussion of her age, the Great Famine is brought up, she quips: "We were respectable people round this street and didn't go in for famines." (18) Her attitude towards those lingering on the past is one of cool disinterest, as seen in her interaction with Jimmy the Sports:

Jimmy the Sports ground his teeth and looked as if he might cry. "God forgive, and you an old woman. My poor mother fell from her own dead mother's arms outside Loughrea workhouse."

Mrs. Murphy took a pinch of snuff. "Well, we all have our troubles. If it's not an ear, it's an elbow. What about the gargle?"

(18)

As caregivers the story's female characters are further shown to be divorced from the image of the ideal woman/mother perpetuated to this day in the Irish constitution:

1° In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2° The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.¹⁴

The constitutionally defined "life within the home" likely includes care duties, both regarding children and elderly relatives. Instead of portraying self-sacrificing mothers, who take on these duties without complaint, Behan writes a scene in which the young narrator overhears some women talking about wasting money on life-insurance policies for elderly relatives who refuse to die, depicting a rather reluctant version of those taking on the role of caretaker. Furthermore, Mrs. Murphy is shown to frequently share her snuff and the occasional drink with the boy: "'An orange or something would be better for the child,' said Jimmy the Sports. / 'The drop of gargle will do him good,' said Mrs. Murphy, 'it's only a little birthday celebration.'" (18) Overall, rather than stop at home to cook and take care of their children or grandchildren, the women in this story are most frequently depicted outside of the home, drinking with friends, defying the idea of "domestic virtues as constitutive of femininity."¹⁵

It is thus all the more significant that once Mrs. Murphy has been declared sick, the other women of the community, more specifically the narrator's grandmother Christina and her friends Long Byrne and Lizzie MacCann, rally together to take care of her. First, they prepare everything for her journey to the "Refuge of the Dying" (20), which may be assumed to be a nursing home, ordering cabs and holding "a kind of wake" (21) for her on the way there. Then, finally outside the Refuge, they are all worried about her fate: "'We'll never see her again now, till we come up to collect her in the box,' said Long Byrne. / 'For God's sake, wisht up out of that, you,' said my granny, 'people's not bad enough.' She fumbled with her handkerchief." (21) So far, the women of "The Last of Mrs. Murphy" have been able to hide their emotions, but here, taking leave of their friend, they struggle to contain them any longer. In addition to being worried that they will not see Mrs. Murphy alive again, they are wary of the institution they are leaving her at: "It's not the kind of place I'd like to leave a neighbour or a neighbour's child." (21) Writing about different working-class authors' depictions of women, Piersie has

¹⁴ "Constitution of Ireland: Article 41.2." *Irish Statute Book*, last modified January 2020, accessed 26 May 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html>. A March 2024 referendum aimed and failed to modify this language. Low voter participation, a rushed process, unclear language, and a general dissent on the proposed changes were partly responsible for this outcome.

¹⁵ Coughlan, "Bog queens," 187.

pointed out that “the institutions of the state are particularly dismissive towards working-class women, who have little social power” (251), explaining the intrinsic distrust the women have of the Refuge. This distrust is soon confirmed to be justified, as a nurse emerges from the building, complaining about the intoxicated state of Mrs. Murphy, before throwing the other women out due to their making drunken jokes about the situation. In contrast to the other women, this nurse is sober, lacks a sense of humour and speaks in what can only be assumed to be an approximation of a south Dublin accent: “Whars in charge of the peeshent?” (22) She is thus, despite her gender, in opposition to the close-knit group of working-class women surrounding Mrs. Murphy.

Finally, the eponymous character emerges from the Refuge and returns home with the rest of the group, where, over some drinks, it is decided that Long Byrne and Lizzie MacCann will take care of her, with the narrator’s grandmother contributing financially. This story depicts women as the backbone, the heart and soul of the working-class community Behan grew up in. Although sometimes mean and often drunk, they care for each other and for each other’s children, they stick together in the face of common enemies, they are willing to sacrifice when necessary and always ready to give to others. Yet, some of them prefer to give financial aid rather than care, and all of them are empowered to make decisions without involving the men of their respective families. In many ways, these women show the strength and power of working-class womanhood depicted through the admiring eyes of a child narrator.

In “The Confirmation Suit,” a similar community of women emerges. As Fallon notes in his introduction to *After the Wake*, the characters in these two stories are unmistakably “fictional neighbours.”¹⁶ The narrator of “The Confirmation Suit” is once again a young boy, this time preparing for his confirmation. Presently, it becomes clear that in this community, it is the women who make the financial decisions: “Twenty-two and sixpence for tweed, I’d expect a share in the shop for that. I’ve a good mind to let him go in jersey and pants for that.”¹⁷ In the narrator’s family, in particular, it is even hinted that a woman is the one who will be most likely to possess the funds for his confirmation suit: “I wasn’t so worried about this. My old fellow was a tradesman, and made money most of the time. Besides, my grandmother, who lived at the top of the next house, was a lady of capernosity

¹⁶ Peter Fallon, “Introduction,” in *After the Wake*, ed. Peter Fallon (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2023), 12.

¹⁷ Brendan Behan, “The Confirmation Suit,” in *After the Wake*, ed. Peter Fallon (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2023), 36-37. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

and function. She had money and lay in bed all day, drinking porter." (37) Indeed, it is revealed that she previously bought the narrator's suit for his first communion. While she seems to be quite well-off, she is also shown to be lacking when it comes to 'domestic virtues':

My grandmother was a gilder by trade, and served her time in one of the best shops in the city, and was getting a man's wages at sixteen. She liked stuff out of the pork butchers, and out of cans, but didn't like boiling potatoes, for she said she was no skivvy, and the chip man was better at it. (38)

It is this tendency of his grandmother's that brings about the central issue of the story. Her sister, Aunt Jack, takes issue with her lifestyle and regularly comes to visit "to stop snuff and drink, and make my grandmother get up in the morning, and wash herself, and cook meals and take food with them." (38) One such meal that Aunt Jack recommends is sheep's head. Following her sister's advice, the narrator's grandmother prepares this meal in an attempt at domesticity that quickly goes wrong: "When she took [the boiled sheep's head] out of the pot, and laid it one the plate, she and I sat looking at it, in fear and trembling. With the soup streaming from its eyes, and its big teeth clenched in a very bad temper, it would put the heart crossways in you." (39) The head lands in the rubbish, while the grandmother has to calm her nerves with a "Baby Power whiskey" (39).

In order to avoid any more unwelcome intrusions from Aunt Jack, the grandmother's friend and neighbour Miss McCann devises a plan: "She would call Aunt Jack in for a minute, and give the signal by banging the grate" (40), thereby enabling the grandmother to "hurl herself out of bed and into her clothes and give her face the rub of a towel" (40), so as to avoid criticism. It is during one of these moments of diversion that Aunt Jack and Miss McCann decide to sew instead of buy the narrator a confirmation suit: "I nearly wept, for terror of what these old women would have me got up in." (41) Indeed, the suit ends up being an embarrassment to the young boy. Despite this, the resourcefulness of the women and their readiness to help each other out – by hiding each other's bad habits and offering to make clothes for the other – is remarkable. Perhaps, Miss McCann's understanding for the habits of the narrator's grandmother, otherwise considered odd, stems from the fact that she herself cuts an uncommon figure. A seamstress who specialises in making funerary habits, she is a woman who earns her own keep and has presumably remained unmarried into old age. Thus, she, too, fails to live up to the specific ideal of Irish womanhood that would see all women married and at the hearth, with a trail of children in tow. While some may

configure Miss McCann as an unfortunate figure, she does not seem to be unhappy, working away at her sewing machine. Instead, she has time to gossip with her friend from upstairs, make the occasional dress for the neighbourhood girls and, as it turns out, some years prior, she was able to help the narrator's mother out by providing care to the boy while his mother was in hospital: "it near broke her heart to give me back" (43). It is this special bond which leads to her offering to make his suit; it is also the reason why the boy's dislike of it causes her great pain.

Like "The Last of Mrs. Murphy," "The Confirmation Suit" is a nostalgic story. Little boys grow up, and old ladies die. In both stories, this goes hand in hand with the knowledge that the way of life depicted here will soon come to an end. The real women holding together these tenement communities would all eventually be moved out to the suburbs in the course of ongoing slum clearances, making brief visits upstairs or next door infinitely more difficult. Indeed, as Brannigan mentions: "the slum clearances of the 1930s struck Behan for their casual destruction of working-class cultures and communities."¹⁸ In these two stories, Behan memorialised just those communities. In "The Confirmation Suit," in particular, a retrospective lens is applied to the story, characterised by the narrator's grown-up perspective towards the end: "I needn't have worried about the suit lasting forever. Miss McCann didn't. The next winter was not so mild." (45) Having long outgrown his confirmation suit he looks back at his childhood, which was populated by a variety of women, relatives and neighbours alike, all of whom had a hand in raising him. None of them are the ideal mother figures and home makers of the constitution, yet they are portrayed with great sympathy. All the women of "The Confirmation Suit" are flawed, whether it be the narrator's grandmother, his Aunt Jack, Miss McCann, or his mother who, disgusted by her son's hypocrisy, tells the old lady about his disdain for her suit, thereby causing her to break down in tears. They put their own interests before others', as is illustrated by Miss McCann's quip that "there wasn't much stirring in the habit line, on account of the mild winter" (41), the lack of demand for funerary habits allowing her to devote time to the sewing of the confirmation suit. They attempt to tell others how to behave while their own lives do not quite match up to what would have been considered the norm within the community – "[Aunt Jack] didn't drink porter or malt, or take snuff, and my father said she never thought much about men either." (38) They earn their own wages, they leave their children to be taken care of by neighbours and they would rather some "cans of lovely things and spicy meat and brawn, and plenty of seasoning, fresh out of the German man's

¹⁸ John Brannigan, *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (2002; Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 64.

shop up the road” (38-39) than a “cheap and nourishing” sheep’s head (39). They clearly do not adhere to gender norms; a fact Behan never critiques. Rather, it is those that would force certain norms within his community that he questions, something that is also apparent in his other short stories.

“After the Wake” and “A Woman of No Standing”

The other two stories to be discussed here, namely “After the Wake” (1950) and “A Woman of No Standing” (1950), are more loosely connected. Yet, while “The Last of Mrs. Murphy” and “The Confirmation Suit” celebrate the working-class community of Behan’s childhood, these two have a more critical tone, pointing out the religious hypocrisy of Ireland at the time, which was rampant both in more bourgeois areas and in the tenements. It is in these two stories that Behan reveals his unique insight into situations that would have been easily condemned at the time, as well as his understanding of those who deviate from a prescribed norm. The women in these stories are not the rambunctious drunken cronies of “The Last of Mrs. Murphy” and they are not the resourceful, scheming, yet loving ‘ould wans’ of “The Confirmation Suit.” Instead, they are haunted by medical neglect, heteronormativity, and restrictive laws. Instead of standing in for all that is good about the working class, these female characters highlight the darker sides of the same community.

“After the Wake” may not seem an obvious choice for an article that analyses female characters. On the surface, it deals with a budding sexual relationship between two men. One of those men, however, has a wife. Nameless like the other two protagonists, and seemingly a marginal character, she plays yet an important role in this story. At first, she seems barely distinguishable from her husband in the eyes of the narrator: “I genuinely liked them both. [...] I’d complemented them, individually and together, on their being married to each other – and I meant it. They were both twenty-one, tall and blond, with a sort of English blondness.”¹⁹ Yet, her gender plays an important role in her own behaviour, as well as in the expectations placed on her. She is full of “adolescent pride in the freedom of her married state to drink a bottle of stout and talk about anything with her husband and her husband’s friend” (46). Interestingly, while Michael Pierson notes that “[a] license for sex, [...] marriage is an agreement between two men (husband and priest), in which a woman is ceremonially disempowered” (124), in this story, marriage is portrayed as granting certain freedoms to the woman.

¹⁹ Brendan Behan, “After the Wake,” in *After the Wake*, ed. Peter Fallon (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2023), 46. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

Indeed, she can indulge in behaviours that would have been seen as inappropriate for an unmarried one, but this does not completely free her of the bounds of convention. When the narrator comes to visit her one day, while her husband is out, this immediately sparks concern: “he warned me about it the next time we were together. He didn’t mind (and I believed him) but people talked etc.” (49)

While this concern speaks to the status of women at the time, restricted both in singledom and in marriage, it is also ironic, since it gives the narrator a cover for his actual interest in the husband. In fact, the wife functions in this story very much as a cover for both men, her marriage to one ensuring that he is above reproach, the supposed infatuation of the other hiding his actual object of seduction. Ostensibly, the couple both fail to notice the narrator’s intention of seducing the husband, but it is only the wife who is explicitly made to look naïve: “one time she had told me, quoting unconsciously from a book I’d lent him, ‘A woman can always tell them – you kind of smell it on a man – like knowing when a cat is in the room.’” (46) This she says, of course, while being unaware that she is talking to a gay man.

In many ways, this story criticises the notion of heteronormativity, long before such a term would have come into usage. Not only does the concept of compulsory heterosexuality force the narrator to conduct himself the way that he does, scheming and hiding his true intentions, it also means that the young husband, who finally gives in to the seduction, as is implied, felt he had no other choice than to marry a woman. This, in turn, means the wife is denied true love and care from both the men who are supposedly in love with her, an issue that she is never fully aware of as, rather conveniently for the plot, she dies before the narrator reveals himself. Her death, caused by “something left unattended since she was fourteen or so” (47), not only points to the medical neglect women often fall victim to, even today,²⁰ but it also provides further cover to the narrator. At her wake, visitors shake his hand, “giving me an understanding smile and licence to mourn my pure unhappy love. Indeed, one old one, far gone in Jameson, said she was looking down on the two of us, expecting me to help him bear up.” (51) This is of course

²⁰ For more information on the mistreatment of women in the medical field see, for example, Amanda C de C Williams, “Women’s Pain Is Routinely Underestimated, and Gender Stereotypes Are to Blame – New Research,” *The Conversation*, 8 April 2021, <https://theconversation.com/womens-pain-is-routinely-underestimated-and-gender-stereotypes-are-to-blame-new-research-158599>; and Anke Samulowitz, Ida Gremyr, Erik Eriksson, and Gunnel Hensing, “‘Brave Men’ and ‘Emotional Women’: A Theory-Guided Literature Review on Gender Bias in Health Care and Gendered Norms towards Patients with Chronic Pain,” *Pain Research and Management*, 25 February 2018, DOI: 10.1155/2018/6358624.

what he plans to do, albeit not exactly in the way the "old one" imagines. Indeed, her illness and subsequent death give the narrator licence to "ope[n] the campaign in jovial earnest" (48), and knowing that his behaviour is far from right, he imagines that "she'd feel angry, not so much jealous as disgusted, certainly surprised" (46), if she were to actually look down on them.

According to Frank McGuinness, Behan in "After the Wake" engages in "open warfare against women."²¹ Indeed, there are several instances in which the central female character is de-individualised, none worse than when she is already dead:

It is a horrible thing how quickly death and disease can work on a body. She didn't look like herself [...]. Her poor nostrils were plugged with cotton-wool and her mouth hadn't closed properly, but showed two front teeth, like a rabbit's. All in all, she looked no better than the corpse of her granny, or any other corpse for that matter.²²

No longer alive and no longer beautiful, she can also no longer stand in the way of the narrator's goal. However, even before her death, the way she is portrayed takes away from any real characterisation. The night before the operation which eventually leads to her death, she is out with her husband and the narrator and confesses

how fearful she was of this operation [...]. She was not sorry for herself, but for him, if anything happened her and she died on him, aye, and sorry for me too, maybe more sorry, "Because, God help you," she said to me, "that never knew anything better than going to town half-drunk and dirty rotten bitches taking your last farthing." (50)

Not only is she depicted here as a selfless saint, solely concerned for the men she will leave behind, but she also speaks disparagingly of other women. Her every waking thought seems to be occupied by these two men, who in turn are also more interested in each other than in her, symbolised perhaps most painfully by her husband's "dry-eyed sobbing" (50).

It is not just her, specifically, that the narrator reduces to little more than a faceless obstacle in the course of his "campaign." Instead, as part of his seduction, he

²¹ Frank McGuinness, "Saint Behan," *Irish University Review* 44, no. 1 (2014): 89.

²² Behan, "After the Wake" 51. For details on the genesis of "After the Wake" and the original description of the wife's dead body in context, see Deirdre McMahon's article in this volume.

introduces the husband to literature and stories of men loving men “to remove the taint of ‘cissiness,’ effeminacy, how the German Army had encouraged it in Cadet Schools, to harden the boy-officers, making their love a muscular clasp of friendship, independent of women.” (48) By attempting to awaken same-sex desire in his friend, the narrator here implies that anything a woman has to offer a man may also easily be provided by another man, in the right circumstances. This conception reduces women to their bodies, effectively dehumanising them. His attempts at portraying women in general, and the wife of the story in particular, as disposable are especially harrowing after his insistence on liking them both, and both of them together.

Just before he finally gets what he wants, the narrator’s thoughts return to her body, cold, innocent, and no longer beautiful, and the American tradition of beautifying the dead: “I fancied her face looking up from the open coffin on the Americans who, having imported wakes from us, invented morticians themselves.” (52) Like the Americans hiding the ugliness of a dead body, the story hides the actual outcome of the narrator’s campaign in favour of this final comment. This, together with earlier qualms about his conscience – “I protested my unsuitability as a pleader with God” (49) – indicates that in many ways, it was the narrator himself that needed to be convinced that she was not as human as her husband, or himself, to justify his “campaign” to himself. This may explain the blatant misogyny of this story; it is not the author spouting anti-woman rhetoric, but rather the narrator creating reasons that would allow him to take her place. Instead of open warfare against womankind, this story is thus an honest, though painful account of the many victims mid-century Ireland’s gender norms, homophobia, and general repressive tendencies claimed. Not only does it comment on what it meant to be gay at a time when loving another man was a greater taboo than lusting after his wife, but it also, perhaps accidentally, becomes an account of what it could mean to be a woman in a society obsessed with purity, normative gender roles, and compulsory heterosexuality.

Similarly, in “A Woman of No Standing,” Behan once again sheds light on the religious hypocrisy of his country, highlighting the lengths people would go to in order to keep up appearances. Indeed, in contrast to the others, the shortest of the selected stories functions much more as a moral parable than a well-fleshed-out story with intricate characterisation. Yet, it is another story in which women take centre stage, albeit once again through the lens of a – presumably – male narrator. There are three female characters in this story, all connected through an absent male protagonist who lies dying at the Pigeon House Sanatorium. The three women are the man’s estranged wife and daughter, as well as his current life-

partner who, in the words of the priest, "is only – what she is."²³ The fact that the representative of the Catholic church shies away from calling her his 'mistress' may be due to a sense of piety, but it may also be in recognition of the fact that this word does not quite fit the situation at hand. After all, as is soon revealed, this woman has been working to support the man for years and has been diligently visiting him at the sanatorium, bringing him chicken soup. This his wife and his daughter take as an affront, regardless of the fact that the latter acknowledges: "we're away from him since I was five" (54). Throughout the story, the ironic tone of the narrator indicates a certain criticism of the situation, juxtaposing a declaration that Ria, the dying man's wife, "was the kindest woman in Ireland" (54), with her relief at his death bringing him no more "than a few short years of harmonious torture in purgatory" (54). The narrator is, however, also characterised by a lust for sensation:

We had a few prayers that night, but she never turned up, and I was sorry, because to tell the truth, I was curious to see her. [...] I had some idea of a big car (owned by a new and tolerant admirer) sweeping into the cortège from some side street or another, or else a cab that'd slide in, a woman in rich mourning heavily veiled in its corner.

(55)

To the narrator's astonishment, the woman who eventually attends the funeral, hidden behind a tree, is "a poor middle-aged woman, bent in haggard prayer," instead of being, as expected, "dolloed up to the nines – paint and powder and a fur coat" (56).

The fact that the narrator's expectations vary so drastically from reality is due to the way everyone else involved, Ria, her daughter, and her priest, had characterised the woman, who was "out scrubbing halls for me dear departed this last four years – since he took bad" (56), as "a walking occasion of sin" (53). Behan, instead, turns her into a martyr, a woman willing to bear the judgement of her entire community for love. She stands in stark contrast to the other two women, and the priest, who all value the supposed sanctity of marriage, and by extension their own reputations, over the life of the man. Behan thus exposes the hypocrisy of mid-century Catholic Ireland, which would rather see a man die alone than allow his marriage to be dissolved. However, the story also leaves some details

²³ Brendan Behan, "A Woman of No Standing," in *After the Wake*, ed. Peter Fallon (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2023), 53. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

unexplained. Pierce notes the difficulty of leaving a violent or unhappy marriage, indicating that without sufficient funds and the right contacts, annulments, the only legal and Church-sanctioned way of ending a marriage at the time, were out of the question (124). Indeed, in a country several decades away from legalising divorce, even separations were frowned upon, not to mention the lack of legal obligation to pay child or spousal support during such a separation. The fact that Ria has apparently separated from the man years prior to the action of the story and is yet seamlessly integrated into her community is thus noteworthy. It may be assumed that she has her own money, which allows her to sustain herself and her daughter, as well as a very good reason to have left her husband (while even domestic violence would often not be seen as sufficient). However, it could also be that the narrator, not being privy to the entire story, is unaware of the reasons for Ria's perhaps perfectly justified negative inclination towards her husband. While her callousness towards him may be questioned by the narrator, she is yet never judged for having separated from him in the first place. Similarly, the "woman of no standing" is pitied, rather than demonised by the narrator as soon as her true situation is revealed to him. It becomes clear that it is society at large that by hindering women's right to free choice is responsible for the overall unhappy situation of the story's characters. On the one hand, this story thus functions as open critique of religious oppression, on the other, it is a lesson not to judge a situation from the outside, with incomplete information.

Conclusion

When looking at Behan's depictions of women in his short stories, no straightforward conclusions can be drawn. Behan can hardly be classified as a feminist writer, but he treats most of his female characters with similar empathy as he does his male ones, allowing them the capacity to be anything from self-denying saints to "screwy bitches."²⁴ He writes some of his stories in homage to the women who raised him, and some to critique a society that victimised them, yet rarely pointing outright towards women's issues. Rather, in his attempt to bring to life the various facets of the Dublin working class, he happened to portray several interesting female characters, because women – both those boisterous, drunken, and surprisingly caring, as well as those demure, oppressed, and self-sacrificing – were a vital part of the community he was raised in and valued highly throughout his life. Pierce

²⁴ Brendan Behan, "The Catacombs," in *After the Wake*, ed. Peter Fallon (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2023), 57. The actual quote is "the screwy old bitch" and refers to another great and little researched female character of Behan's, María Bolívar.

has written extensively about the preoccupation many male working-class writers share with the plight of working-class women. Yet, the women of Brendan Behan’s short stories are not the eternally suffering abused women of the texts he studies. Instead, Behan’s stories stand as testimony of the strength, resilience, and gumption of Dublin working-class women; they tell of women who break the rules, who earn their living, who take care of children and the elderly, albeit reluctantly; they tell the tale of women who never get married as well as those that regret doing so. Behan’s women are decision makers, refusers of household chores, and victims of patriarchal systems. What emerges is thus a varied, colourful, and perhaps accidentally woman-heavy image of the Dublin working class. A larger-scale study of both the women who influenced Behan’s life and work and the female characters he wrote inspired by them might allow further conclusions about the frank and uncritical approach Behan seems to have to women who fall outside of the norm; this may open up new avenues of inquiry into Behan’s small but impressive oeuvre.

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