



The Parish Review  
Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies

Cathryn Piwinski, 'Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health (2023) by Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.11673>



Open Library of Humanities

## ***Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health*** **(2023) by Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston**

Cathryn Piwinski, English, Rutgers University, US, [cmp360@english.rutgers.edu](mailto:cmp360@english.rutgers.edu)

---

Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston's *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* combines archival research with incisive textual analysis to examine how topics such as sex, fertility, contraception, hygiene, and eugenics were circulated in Ireland from the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Reading medical case studies and newspaper articles alongside literary works by J.M. Synge, W.B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, Kate O'Brien, and Brian O'Nolan, Houston's book is a remarkable history of sexual politics and sexual rhetoric in Irish public life.

---

*The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

OPEN ACCESS



Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston's new book, *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health*, examines the significance of sexual health, and its social, cultural, and political valences, in Irish modernist literature, spanning from J.M. Synge to Brian O'Nolan. The project combines close readings of individual works by major Irish authors with a more historical telling and analysis of how topics such as sex, fertility, contraception, hygiene, and eugenics were publicly circulated in Ireland from the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The book's third chapter best exemplifies this methodology, which links the language of James Joyce's *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, a historical rhetoric of inherent Irish purity from Oliver Gogarty and *Sinn Féin*, and an archival account by one sex worker and the discrimination she faced on account of anti-British sentiment and growing public fear of venereal disease. The chapter underlines the intersection of Irish modernist literature and the social history of sexual health, demonstrating that works of fiction and everyday public discourses informed and responded to each other through a common interest in the political and cultural significance of sex, which in turn encouraged debate around heredity, hygiene, race, class, and medicine.

The imbrication of these texts—Joyce's books, Gogarty's essays, and the anonymous worker's letter—represents Houston's project's larger aim to combine three strands of literary scholarship: New Modernist Studies, Irish Modernist Studies, and the history of sexual health and medicine. This interdisciplinary approach is in service of an expansive argument illustrating, in Houston's words,

both the extent to which Irish modernism derived its aesthetic force and cultural relevance from its deliberately provocative deployment of the medicalized and politicized conception of sex and the ways in which the increasing normalization of this model of sexual health in the nation's political and cultural life eventually served to rob Irish modernism of much of its experimental impetus and iconoclastic charge.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* reads modernist Irish literature and late nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical documents to uncover more complicated narratives of the politicized nature of debates around sexual health. These debates, 'seldom straightforward' and 'often contentious,' provide critical material for literature as it worked to capture complex Irish identities, cultures, and communities (Houston 2).

It is its intersecting methodological use of these three studies—New Modernist Studies, Irish Modernist studies, and the social history of sexual health—that makes *Irish*

---

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston, *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192889492.001.0001>, 27.

*Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* timely in its publication, unique in its scope, exhaustive in its subject-matter, and useful for scholars across a variety of disciplines. New Modernist Studies' recognition of a more ambivalent relationship between literary modernism and technological modernity complements Irish Modernist Studies' attention to the complexity of Irish cultural and social history and its impact on literary modernism. Their cooperation, Houston writes, illuminates 'specificities of social, political, and cultural life in Ireland' that 'yielded a version of "sexual modernism" sometimes quite distinct from the one surveyed in... [earlier] Anglo-American studies' (11). Indeed, Houston's is the first systematic mapping of the 'the vibrant "two-way" exchanges and moments of "creative misprision" that took place between literature, science, and medicine concerning questions of sex and its regulation' (11) in Ireland, as opposed to England or the United States, during this time.

*Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* therefore fills a gap in modernist scholarship and does so through a meticulous reading of wide-ranging materials. While it certainly focuses on more dominant names in the literary canon—Synge, W.B. Yeats, Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Kate O'Brien, and O'Nolan—it steps beyond these more classic examples to analyse narratives not traditionally found under the umbrella of modernist literature; these include the mythmaking around Charles Stewart Parnell, anti-British sentiment during the Anglo-Boer War, documents and pamphlets that charted the spread, public opinion, and treatment (or lack thereof) of venereal disease across Ireland, and the cultural influence of the Censorship of Publications Board. Houston's remarkable research into these historical moments is paired with incisive close readings of archival materials that extend across a range of genres. Their early contribution to a history of sexual health in Irish modernism is a significant one in its breadth and its detail, and lays much of the necessary critical groundwork for future interdisciplinary scholarship.

Houston's commitment to detail, as well as their ability to weave these details together into a uniform argument, is evident from the first chapter; after a clear and concise introduction, the first chapter in *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* consults newspaper and magazine articles, medical case studies, and other materials alongside work such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* to illustrate how, during the O'Shea divorce and split, Parnell's supporters crafted a public persona of 'great health' in which 'neither continence nor virility was compromised' (46), while his detractors presented him as a 'degenerative and sexually pathological threat to the physical and intellectual integrity of the Irish people' (68). Chapter Two addresses the *Playboy* riots specifically, but examines the range of Synge's bibliography and much of Yeats's, to claim that both the play and the debates it inspired

are best considered as incidents of an emerging 'sexual modernism' that ultimately upsets the traditional and 'apparently clear boundary between a sexually conservative nationalism and a sexually frank modernism' (102) in Ireland. Chapter Three turns to questions of hygiene as they are intertwined with a growing awareness of venereal disease in Ireland; in this chapter, Houston consults a range of accounts and campaigns (noted at the beginning of this review), pairing them with a thorough reading of Joyce's works, to demonstrate how sexual health was politicized and stigmatized to construct a pure Irish identity against the more polluted British. Both the fourth and fifth chapters address the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, concentrating on the Act's concern over sexually explicit materials and charting its intersection with eugenicist rhetorics that dominated the literature of contemporary birth control movements. The chapters read the works of Beckett and Kate O'Brien respectively, ultimately suggesting that both authors have a far more ambivalent relationship with sexual health, women's autonomy, and contraception and abortion than critics have accounted for thus far. Houston's reading of Beckett's *Premier amour/First Love*, among others, reveals a more complex sexual politics and engagement with eugenics that chafes against the author's more progressive legacy. Likewise, Houston points in depth to the 'issues of desire, fertility and notions of "fitness" dramatized in O'Brien's writing,' that illustrate 'the tensions and contradictions that could arise for [authors] who sought to marry a eugenic conception of sex and sexuality with an investment in personal freedom, democracy, and equality' (194).

It is the sixth and final chapter in *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* that will most interest readers of *The Parish Review*. Curiously, Houston makes use of O'Nolan's *The Hard Life*, widely understood as one of the author's 'weakest efforts' (235), as the primary example for their claim that the discourses of sexual health had been exhausted by the 1960s in Ireland. On *The Hard Life*, they ask why 'in the midst of a tentative moment of social and cultural liberalization in Ireland, O'Nolan chose to revisit a high-water mark in the cultural revival and to examine why sexual health plays such a prominent role in this ambivalent homage' (240). The potential answers to this question that Houston finds in O'Nolan's works usefully gather the subjects of earlier chapters, from the Parnell myth to the social and medical response to venereal disease to the Censorship Act, in order to show how they all 're-emerge in a performatively "exhausted" or "used-up" manner' (240). In charting the complex relationship between modernist experimentation and sexual health as it relates to Irish identity in *The Hard Life*, Houston finds a diminishment of its shock-value. As such, they argue that O'Nolan's inability to incite a response from Irish censors 'reflects the extent to which Irish modernism's approach to questions of sexual health has lost its

iconoclastic charge' (261). One does not get the impression, though, that Houston is noting a failure or insufficiency on O'Nolan's part. Quite the opposite, as they write that O'Nolan's *The Hard Life* is 'simultaneously belated and timely' (262), thus highlighting the novel as a critical attestation of the natural end of Irish modernism's provocative engagement with the politics of sexual health and the emergence of a postmodern rhetoric of exhaustion. Readers of *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* will appreciate the work's fresh perspective on one of O'Nolan's more dismissed novels, which, in turn, exemplifies the monograph's ground-breaking efforts and critical utility.

The above chapter summaries do not, ultimately, do justice to Houston's *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health*, which is intellectually rich and notable in its wide-ranging research and clarity of argument and writing. If there is a weakness here, it is the ambition of it all, with a density of detail that can, at times, be overwhelming for a reader. Nevertheless, it is this same ambition that creates a book indispensable for scholars of Irish literature and history, who will find not just an illuminating argument around the role of sexual health in Irish modernism, but also an extensive collection of well-read sources, archival material, and contextualizing information that will prove essential for future work in these fields. Graduate students and faculty in English or Irish literature, political, medical, and social and cultural history, and gender and sexuality studies will find this to be a useful sourcebook. Houston concludes their work with a gesture towards future scholarship, outlining potential inquiries, such as a more focused project on the trans-national legacy of the politicization of sexual health in Ireland, that *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* might inform; and, undoubtedly, it will.

---

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

---

