A Story of Two Cultures in Doreen Finn’s *Night Swimming* (2019)

Abstract

Doreen Finn’s novel *Night Swimming* (2019) is set during the summer heatwave of 1976 Dublin. The story is narrated by the nine-year-old Irish girl, Megan, who lives in a large Victorian house with her mother (Gemma) and grandmother (Sarah). An American family rent their downstairs flat, and this encounter of two cultures provides the framework for the entire story in which American and Irish sensibilities, mentalities, stereotypical features, and cultural markers are set against each other.

The motif that permeates the entire work is the metaphor “night swimming”, which highlights the notion of going against the expected norms set by society. The loss of innocence involved envelops all the characters one way or another, and to which all must react in their own way. In the end all the characters are forced to “grow up” and come to terms with their lives and their environment.

Keywords

Cultural symbolism, stereotypical images, loss of innocence, social obligations

A fictional narrative or story is brought to life by its author and though the chosen perspective and focus may be fictional, which implies a decisive distancing of the author from the characters themselves, nevertheless, the author’s interpretation defines the overall scope of the work. The mode of storytelling therefore is determined by the author. Storytelling presents a sequence of memories. These memories which may consist of childhood or previous adult experiences permeate and highlight specific happenings in a work of fiction and the story itself. The creative process involved, therefore, reflects the author’s visionary capacity on how to unfold the intricately structured memories layer by layer.

Doreen Finn’s 2019 publication of *Night Swimming* is a lively and moving story that relates the experiences of a nine-year-old Irish girl named Megan. Based on her own childhood memories Finn set the narrative in the summer of Dublin, Ireland, in the year 1976.
The year 1976 was specifically chosen as being a memorable summer due to its unusual and extreme heatwave—for Ireland—that lasted throughout the months of July and August. This authentic experience of the heatwave provides the backdrop for the story and the events that it ultimately triggered. The location of the entire story is set in a large Victorian style house in Ranelagh, a residential area on the south side of Dublin.

The story unfolds through the narration of Megan, a mere child, “who began to observe people around [her], [her] attention tuned to the slightest change” (Finn 2019: Loc 79). This method unaccountably raises questions as to who the author targets as an audience. However, because of its deeper socio-cultural implications the novel cannot be considered a work for adolescents. Furthermore, as Megan’s sensory perceptions of the adult world are extremely acute, the reader acquires a rather varied image of a growing child and an adult’s past recollections simultaneously. This does not reduce the quality of the novel, on the contrary, it enhances our understanding of the environment and the world portrayed within the work and places it within a timeless frame.

The Dublin suburban backdrop of the mid 1970s offers us a glimpse of an Ireland that is loaded with the silent secrets of the past. Doreen Finn comments on this on Talks at Google by saying that the “Irish are famous for keeping secrets” (Finn 2019: “Talks at Google”). The novel is a portrayal of three women, Megan (the nine-year-old child), Gemma (Megan’s mother), and Sarah (Megan’s grandmother). They may be considered an average family, except for the fact that the male counterpart, the father figure, is missing. This is immediately clarified by Megan, at the beginning of the novel, when she says, “My father was disappeared. He didn’t disappear himself; it was done to him. He had no control over it, and he was gone before he knew about me, before he had a chance to meet his only child” (Finn 2019: Loc 17). The father is simply a metaphorical concept of the past tense defined as gone or not here. These “missing” male figures are a general feature of the story.

The “secrets” implied in the novel, therefore, relate to these women, and on a wider scale, Irish women, and their designated socio-cultural roles within Irish society. Historically speaking, as Finn mentions in her talk, rules were made to govern women and to render them invisible. These rules were made to maintain appearances (Finn 2019: “Talks at Google”). The issue that acquires centre focus is “unmarried motherhood”, as Finn said, whereby certain social obligations were enforced by the Catholic Church, this meant that Irish women, outside of wedlock, were forced to give up their babies for having committed a “grave sin” (Finn 2019: “Talks at Google”). According to certain statistical data that Finn discovered, in 1967 “97% of babies born in Ireland were given away” (Finn 2019: “Talks at Google”). These
women became outcasts within their society, many being sent to the institutions referred to as the Magdalene Laundries, a prison in many ways that became a threatening menace for women. Gemma, in the novel, goes against the rules and ultra-conservative views upheld by the Church when she decides to keep Megan and virtually breaks all ties with the local parish knowing well that she will be ostracized by her community. Gemma, then, is a martyr, but also a self-contained artist, who like a hermit buries herself in her work. Sarah is a modern woman of her time, too, like Gemma, who goes out of her way to protect Megan’s childhood innocence from unwanted gossip, unpleasant remarks and even political upheavals in the world (even the “troubles” in Northern Ireland) mentioned on the radio news. Megan, however, is portrayed as a very astute child, who as the narrator of the story sees, understands and knows a lot more of the world than she may let on. Additionally, there is also a strong sense of guilt implied on the part of Megan who feels responsible for her mother being in this situation. This guilt, however, goes both ways which seems to infuse the entire atmosphere of the household. One cannot therefore call this a typical Irish family of the 1970s.

The year 1976 was memorable not only for its heatwave, but also its international political conflicts (the Vietnam War, the Northern Ireland conflicts, etc.), and also the summer Olympics which were currently taking place. This gradual opening towards the outside world presupposes the entrance of foreign cultures. The effect of another culture on this somewhat introvert, secretive environment provides the twist that eventually forces emotions to erupt. An American family rent the downstairs flat and introduce a foreign culture that totally rattles the closed and private sphere of Megan’s family. Finn’s honest depiction of the extrovert, saying-it-all brash and loud American family highlights the many differences between the two cultures. American versus Irish food culture is one aspect that illustrates the lack of food culture within Ireland until recently, whereas as Megan says, “the Americans brought us many things that summer. New food. Cocktails. Quesadillas and margaritas, frittatas and mimosas, our tongues tied on the unfamiliar sounds” (Finn 2019: Loc 35). Though these foods are not exactly American in its essence, as hamburgers and hotdogs are, still it shows the American acknowledgement and acceptance of foreign tastes as its own.

Another aspect displaying the cultural differences presented in the novel was the music that the American family—Judith, Chris and Beth—bequeath to them such as Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, the Ramones, and the Doors. Through music, as with food, Megan’s family is offered a different perspective of the world. After all, this was “such a change from the music we habitually listened to up to then” (Finn 2019: Loc 35). Exotic names and Americanisms, foods and music hitherto unknown “gave us new ways of looking at the world,
broke us out of our Irish slumber” (Loc 35). Furthermore, as Megan comments, “the Americans gave us truth, though we may not have liked it at the time” (Loc 35).

Truth surfaces slowly as the novel progresses and coupled with the heat becomes unbearable. Through Megan’s narration Finn explains that “the truth emerged, vapour-like and shimmering. Like the heat, it was insistent, pressing itself on us, demanding our attention” (Loc 41). The intensity of the heat and its sensations presents a new perspective where emotions that have been kept tightly under control suddenly run havoc, as Gemma and Chris become emotionally entangled thereby risking the disruption of both families. With the loss of innocence sensibilities clash.

Into the emotionally intense setting enters the main motif of the novel, the metaphor of “night swimming”, which is like a double-edged sword in the story. Ironically, the children are not the only ones “night swimming” which implies the act of daring to do something that is not allowed or frowned upon, or even going against social expectations and behavioural norms. Furthermore, one may even say that all the characters in the novel are “night swimming”. Reminding one of Oscar Wilde’s famous play The Importance of Being Earnest where the act of “bunburying” becomes the norm for the young gentlemen when seeking to avoid social obligations. Within the story the children, Megan, Beth, Daniel and Stevie secretly enjoy splashing around at night in the abandoned pool of their neighbour, while Gemma and Chris secretly rendezvous during the night, Judith desperately tries to be the loving and caring wife that she is most certainly not, while Sarah is like a tigress protecting her cubs (Gemma and Megan) from the outside world at all cost.

The inspiration for the novel, according to Grenham in The Gloss, originally comes from the similarly-named song Nightswimming (1992) from R.E.M. Finn had been a great fan of Michael Stipe, and as Finn revealed following her interview, the first draft of the novel was written while listening to this song (Grenham 2019). However, the book took fifteen years to finish.

Nevertheless, the ideas that the song conveys seep through the story reminding us that we all have a reckless side to us. The heatwave of 1976, therefore, is the perfect backdrop that places the characters in situations where the norms of social conduct and behaviour are abandoned. The careless disregard for consequences signals the end of innocence for each protagonist, whether this is a child or an adult. And what is left is a “version of ourselves, an uncomplicated truth, a lost simplicity” as Finn wrote in the Irish Times (Finn 2019 “Anything can happen”).
I sincerely enjoyed this novel for its ease and fluidity of language. Through the portrait of a young adolescent girl we get to see into the depths and anomalies of two cultures—Irish and American, introvert and extrovert—and how these relate to one another in extreme situations. The confrontations and misunderstandings in many ways convey stereotypical markers, though these still highlight significant and very human values. Though the male characters are weaker and insignificant beside their female counterparts, the authentic Dublin atmosphere of the seventies as seen through the haze of the heat makes up for any inconsistencies and offers a delightful, gratifying, and memorable read.

Works Cited