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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**The End of the Traditional Mother: The Role of Violet
and Marjorie in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach***

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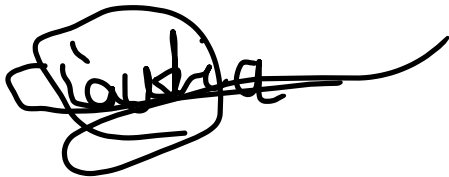
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Abstract

In the middle of the 20th century, females were expected to start a family, which was the only tolerable outcome of a woman's sexuality. Therefore, they had to be perfect mothers, according to the institution of motherhood, which could not be always achieved. The approaches taken in the study of it varied depending on each historical period. In Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, set in the 1962, two different mothers appear, which approach their role differently. One of them is "mentally damaged" while the other one does not provide maternal care to her children. Even though both are dysfunctional, I wonder whether they still fit into the ideals of a traditional mother of that time. After carrying out the analysis of the novel, I attempt to prove how both characters challenge the standards of motherhood, and how it influences their children.

To evidence this, a close reading and analysis of the novel will take place, giving close attention to the presence and behaviour of these figures in the novel, and on how it might be reflected in the life and growth of the protagonists, by how they feel and behave in certain passages. To give a proper analysis I am going to focus secondary sources about motherhood as a concept, that make sense of psychological aspects and of recovering individuality. Linked to this, I may use feminist sources focused on the importance of mothers as individuals, and on sexual freedom. Finally, I aim to use sources on the chosen novel as well.

Keywords: *On Chesil Beach*, Ian McEwan, traditional motherhood, experience of motherhood, sexual revolution.

0. Introduction

Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, published in 2007, is a story about the wedding night of a young just-married couple in the 1960s. In it, McEwan portrays the situation of women in the twentieth century in different ways. In the middle of the century, the female figure was expected to follow the old-fashioned set of rules about behaviour, which came from two world wars, and previous historical periods. The purpose of those rules was the same as it had always been: being perfect to the male gaze to find someone to marry, and then please their husband through life. The traditional aim of marriage was still that of founding a family, and female sex was yet linked to the socially accepted goal of pregnancy and motherhood to a great extent.

In the novel, a sexual revolution was yet to occur, the pill was beginning to get commercialized in England, and the growth of feminism had a long way to walk to bring certain changes for females. However, until that happened, women with descendance had the pressure to fulfil the role of the ideal mother and fit the standards of what was understood from motherhood as an institution¹. However, each one's experience was different. Mothers who could not achieve these standards of perfection could be socially regarded as dysfunctional, or "bad", mainly because their role as mothers is essential for the development of functional and healthy human beings. Even if the experience of motherhood is different for each individual, it should endure some standards, as the

¹ In this essay I will be referring to motherhood either as institution or as experience, following the definition that Adrienne Rich provided in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, in 1976. This dichotomy has been central ever since in the feminist debate around family roles and refers to a necessary distinction between the social notion of motherhood and the individual experience of it. This is going to be developed in section 2.1

mother-child relationship has important consequences in the development of an individual.

The matching between the personal experience of motherhood and those standards is sometimes unclear and difficult to achieve. Given the case that mothers achieved the standards of society, they were not necessarily functional towards their child. In *On Chesil Beach*, the mothers of the main characters, whose functionality can be put into doubt, are examples of two different experiences of motherhood. First, Edward's mother, Marjorie, was a victim of an accident that left her "mentally damaged". On the other hand, Florence's mother, Violet, is cold and distant. Even though both are perceived as dysfunctional towards their children, it is worth to explore whether they still fit into the ideals of the traditional mother. After carrying out the analysis of the novel, I will attempt to prove whether Marjorie and Violet challenge the standards of motherhood, and how it influences their children.

1. Historical Situation

The novel is set in mid-20th century. Precisely, in the 60s, in a decade in which everything as it had been known was about to change. Many historical and political facts can be read throughout the novel, which helps to historically contextualise the plot: "This was the era – it would end later in that famous decade – when to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure" (McEwan 6). This, for the rising generations of the period meant that their youth had one single focus and outcome: becoming adults and experiencing the consequences that it brought. Youth meant being childlike, "and being childlike was not yet honourable, or in fashion" (McEwan 18). This idea of youth has been transformed as

now being young for the most time possible is an aim in itself due to the freedom that it implies. However, considering the views on youth in the decade, it follows that marriage was considered the beginning of becoming someone decent, experienced, and settled. Hence, young people tended to hurry into marriage. In the novel, the two young main characters have just reached this step forward and are celebrating their marriage in their wedding night. Their personal experience and growth are complemented with flashbacks that provide readers with the character's background and development as the novel advances.

The novel presents an inevitable collision between the generations upbrought from the historical setting and the post-war consequences. An instance of this is the moment in the couple's wedding night, when the radio is on, and the Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, is giving a speech in Washington on a test-ban treaty. This nuclear disarmament is what Florence and Edward, the protagonists of the story, are seen fighting against, and striking for on some occasions. This runs counter to the views of Florence's mother, Violet, who supports the nuclear movement. Florence perceives herself as the opposite of her parents, and of her previous generations, whose views were becoming old-fashioned for the period.

This contrast between the old and the young generation is perceived regarding sexuality as well. For instance, a new view on pre-marital sex, and masturbation, was beginning to take place. As Edward states, "He was born too late in the period, [...], to believe that he was abusing his body [or] that his sight would be impaired" (McEwan 20). This explanation about masturbation indicates how the views on sexuality were progressing in the decade, as it had been once believed that masturbation was something bad, or a sin, that would have disastrous consequences on the individual. Besides, Edward explains how people in his university were having sex "without having to meet each

other's parents" (McEwan 40), even if it was better to wait. This implies an evolution, as the affairs of unmarried people did not need to be kept as hidden as youths had previously done, and the sense of freedom was more reachable. In 1962, the sexual revolution was about to take place.

Furthermore, all this meant a turning point especially for woman's sexual liberation, since the Pill was invented in the United States in 1960 and began to be commercialised in Britain in 1961 for married women. This invention gave married women a little more freedom regarding their sexuality and choice of life. With it, sex was gaining new meanings for females, as they could expect more than a pregnancy from their sexuality, and they could veritably enjoy it. Nonetheless, until 1967, the Pill was only prescribed to married women. Before it was accessible to all females, some unmarried women wore wedding rings in medical consultations in order to be prescribed this contraceptive (Iglowski-Broad), which proves the long road ahead of woman's sexual liberation, and the general will of woman to achieve it.

The progression in the general mentality of the society was clear by all the changes that occurred in the decade. However, on the meantime, the general change was unnoticeable, and would be until later years. Therefore, in 1974, Philip Larkin published in the volume *High Windows*, the poem "Annus Mirabilis", written in 1967, the same year in which the Pill became fully accessible. In it, he explores openly the sexual revolution and the changes that it brought to the society of the decade. For instance, and as implied in the poem, sexuality could be spoken about more openly, as well as experimented more freely due to the implementation of condoms and oral contraception. Examining the poem more closely, it can be seen how he claims 1963 as the beginning of "sexual intercourse" – referring to genuine sex without following conventions.

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three

(which was rather late for me) -
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP.
Up to then there'd only been
A sort of bargaining,
A wrangle for the ring,
A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything.
Then all at once the quarrel sank:
Everyone felt the same,
And every life became
A brilliant breaking of the bank,
A quite unlosable game.
So life was never better than
In nineteen sixty-three
(Though just too late for me) -
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP.

According to Larkin, what pointed out this revolution was “the end of the Chatterley Ban”, and “the Beatles’ first LP”. To begin with, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, by D. H. Lawrence (1928) had been banned due to the explicit descriptions of female pleasure, and of extramarital sex between an upper-class woman and a working-class man. Because of this, the novel was banned by the Obscene Publications Act². However, in 1960, the publisher Penguin Books won against the act, and sold the novel at an accessible price. This shows how the views on sexuality changed, and how this topic began to be more openly spoken about. Secondly, in 1963, the Beatles released their first LP, “Please Please Me”. In it, lyrics about sex and kinks were suggested. The fact that the band became famous after that LP, and gained a massive fanbase also suggests how society in the decade were more open about sexual matters, and social awareness. In addition, Pop Culture represented the portrayal and discussion of social matters and awareness that concerned all social classes, as it was portrayed in Pop art. Pop Culture was accessible to

² Obscene Publications Act (1959): The ban of texts that were considered likely of corrupting and perverting morally its readers.

the general public. Finally, the two events that Larkin mentions, represent a turning point for the period, as they reflect the eventual change of traditional values of society.

Even though the protagonists of *On Chesil Beach* were still young to experiment by first-hand the changes of the sexual revolutions, they were born in the 40s, and grew up with a lot of historical progression ahead. Hence, their mothers experienced the changes on women that took place from before the war, until the decade of the sixties. Until then, history marked them and their experience of motherhood enormously. For instance, they underwent the change of working patterns for women. As explained by Angela Davis, after the Second World War, women did not only work in factories, but also began to work in the field of teaching and nursing (Davis 142). However, their role at home and as mothers was considered paramount over any other job. (Davis 143)

The expectations of these women, due to the education provided to them throughout their growth, were of becoming “full-time mothers” (Davis 146). Hence, they were indulged towards the “profession” of motherhood. Nonetheless, by learning and acquiring new experiences outside home, mothers began to realise how motherhood had been glorified until that moment, and how they had been denied individual expectations. Eventually, during the decade of the sixties, “the dissatisfied, educated mother was a stereotypical figure” (Davis 147) due to their level of education, as their attitude towards motherhood depended on it. For instance, there are recollections of letters from graduate mothers in *The Guardian* newspaper in the 1960s that express how they began to enjoy their life outside the house and found those experiences liberating. This brought many feminists to believe that motherhood as something innate was a construct of society. Even if giving birth is natural in a woman, being a mother is not the responsibility of woman (Neyer & Bernardi 165). However, because of their upbringing, many mothers felt ashamed of their negative feelings towards motherhood, and their rejection towards their

home life (Davis 147). Consequently, a distinction required to be done between natural motherhood, and the experience of motherhood. This distinction was made by Adrienne Rich in 1976, in a book called *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, which is going to be explained in the next section.

2. Study of the mothers in the novel

2.1. Motherhood as an institution: The tradition vs experience of motherhood

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published in 1976 by the poet and intellectual Adrienne Rich, the author makes the distinction between motherhood as an institution and the experience of motherhood. To differentiate these terms, she uses literature on traditional motherhood and her own experience. The motivation behind it is that, like many other mothers, Rich could not relate her own experience to what was established: “This book was written [...] in resistance to all” (Rich ix)”, “I wanted to examine motherhood in a social context, as embedded in a political institution: in feminist terms” (Rich ix).

According to Rich, “traditional motherhood” refers to the institution of motherhood, which is heavily linked to patriarchy. Hence, it is linked to the oppression undergone by woman throughout history. As she puts it, “the patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the “human condition” but (...) an ideology”(Rich 33). “As mothers, women have been idealized³ and also exploited” (Rich xxiv).

Considering this analysis of traditional motherhood, the experience of it is consequently the contrary. Nurture, for example, is learnt, and not acquired by instinct as is socially

³ This derives from the nineteenth century, when females were idealised and expected to be chaste and maternal. (Rich, xxiv)

expected (Rich 12). More extensively, Rich contrasts the ideals of motherhood with her experience:

“(…) a “natural” mother is a person without further identity, who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children (...); that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless; (...) I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is “unconditional”, and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren’t those parts then abnormal, monstrous? (...) You seemed to feel you ought to love us all the time. But there is no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment” “Yes, (...), but women-above all, mothers-have been supposed to love that way” (Rich 22-23)

This passage implies how different the experience is from the tradition. In society, women are perceived only as mothers, naturally attached to, and nurturing, their children rather than individuals. Those who did not fit were made feel “abnormal, monstrous”.

Adrienne Rich’s essay helped many mothers to normalise their own experience. These women related to Rich’s experience and realised that the institution of motherhood was far from reality. As Andrea O’Reilly expresses, “Reading Rich I was forced to see and name my oppression as a mother; it gave me permission to be angry. I also remember feeling a huge sense of relief: I was not the only woman who raged against motherhood, and at times, her children.” (O’Reilly 3).

Of Mother Born, even if it is outdated, is a relevant source for the analysis of the female, and motherly figures from *On Chesil Beach*. It was written a decade after the year on which *On Chesil Beach* was set and, therefore, the experiences and institution notions are described as they were common at the time. Moreover, this source is central to subsequent theories of feminism and motherhood, and so, it has been analysed until present times. Because of this, in this essay I am also going to use and mention more recent authors that have analysed Rich’s contribution, like Andrea O’Reilly, or Fiona J Green, which evidence its relevance in today’s society.

2.2 An analysis of Marjorie

Since the beginning of the novel, there are hints that Marjorie, Edward's mother, is an unusual character, not to say dysfunctional. For instance, she is said in the first page of the novel to not have misbehaved in the wedding of the main characters, which indicates that this "good behaviour" is not common on her. This fact is also made clear by the use of "squalid family home" (McEwan 37) to refer to Edward's house. Traditionally, as Rich explains, chores are a motherly task, as it was "what women [had] always done" (Rich 25). Hence, the choice of language not only suggests the low-class status of the family, but also that the mother – who was traditionally supposed to do it – is not able to keep the house clean or pleasant to live in. This is confirmed later in the novel, as it is made clear that the mother is disabled, and that the father, Lionel, works too much to keep up with all the chores alone. In addition, the fact that when their "children were old enough, they helped out, but ineffectually" (McEwan 63) implies that they never grew up into the habit of housework, nor saw it appropriately in their parents. Hence, it is hinted that the mother's disability was present since the children were small, as they did not take the habit especially from her.

Marjorie suffered an accident when Edward was four, and while she was pregnant with twins, which meant the decline of both of her individuality and of her motherly role. As she was waiting for the train in a railway, she got hit in the head with the frame of the door of the train, which fractured her cranium and put her in a coma, from which she woke up with a "dislocated [...] personality, intelligence and memory" (McEwan 70). This context does not only explain the reason why her dysfunctional behaviour began, but also gives us a hint of how her personality was before the accident. Nothing indicates that she did not fit the standards of a traditional mother before it, but rather the contrary. In the moment of the accident, she was well dressed, and holding Christmas presents for

her family. This suggests the regular behaviour from a mother, decisive and active into making her family happy. After that, Edward recalls that everything changed abruptly in her, and in their house.

In the Mayhew family, the father not only did some chores, but also took the role to care about their children's general wellbeing and school life. This family experience contrasts with the traditional middle-class family, as the father doing the chores and taking care of the children was understood as "help, [...] an act of generosity" (Rich 27) towards the mother. Conventionally, her figure is the one in charge to do such things, and especially, to be present in her children's life. As Rich confirms, "It is still assumed that the mother [...] is held accountable for her children's health, the clothes they wear, their behavior at school, their intelligence and general development". (Rich 53)

Marjorie's lack of presence into her family's life, implies the presence of her in other tasks. She is explained to wander around her house, independently of the time, playing the piano, observing birds, scrapping pictures from magazines, doing pottery, painting, knitting, and starting activities which she never finishes nor cleans (McEwan 65-66). Everything she did to occupy her mind was done chaotically and intensely, which represented what was going on in her mind. Because she lived in her own world and far from reality, in her own eyes, she was a functional and caring mother and wife, who did the chores and activities required in the household with some free time to do her own things afterwards. Her internal lie was so true to her, that she believed to be the one who cooked dinner for her family, and that was the reason why they thanked her for it. In her own mind, she followed the standards and achieved the expectations set on motherhood.

Consequently, as Marjorie internally behaves as if the accident had not happened, it is implied, once again, that she had once fit into the standards of motherhood. The traditional, and ideal mother, as expressed by Fiona Joy Green in her essay about Rich's

Of Mother Born, is the one who stays at home, has an “innate ability to parent”, is a loving mother and wife, is selfless, “adopts their wants, needs and happiness as her own, [...] and] has a connection with her children” (J Green 127). In some moments, she was affectionate and communicative towards her family. They occurred often after panic attacks at the realisation of her own level of detriment, and at becoming aware that she did not fulfil the requirements socially set on her as a woman. The moments of love and nurture were interpreted by Edward as an attempt to make up for her mental absence towards her children, and to regain control in her life. Even if she went back to the present self soon after, her children were happy to accept her brief showers of love and attention. Her intermittent signs of attention prove the need from the child of the mother’s love, even if they did not know whether they would occur again.

Even though in the Mayhew family everything worked the other way around, its members never felt or behaved resentful or angry because of Marjorie’s state. Instead, they treated her with care and love, and protected her from reality. For instance, they thanked her for a dinner that she did not cook because it was the only way to neutralise the absurd world in which she lived (McEwan 68). In addition, they contributed to the external belief that their mother was charismatic and artistic, because this is how people perceived her, and this was how she was on the inside. This normalisation from the outsiders to perceive her as charismatic and artistic is supported by the examples provided by Adrienne Rich, of women being involved in arts such as pottery, which has become something rooted to motherhood since ancient times. (Rich 96-97). Therefore, those who did not belong to her family and who were not aware of her struggles, perceived her as a traditional mother, even if she actually could not fulfil those requirements.

For Edward, giving a name to his mother’s derangement was essential to distance himself from the situation and to accept the truth. Before that moment, Edward was able

to hide from reality and from the veritable state of his mother. Everything acquired a serious tone, as it was not only that she was different, but that she had a health condition that invalidated her from normality. Yet, his attentions towards her did not change, but rather had a meaning and a sense. He had a purpose to keep acting like he always did, and never stopped treating her with warmth and kindness. In addition, because he could now distance himself from what was occurring in his family, “one day he would leave, and would return only as a visitor” (McEwan 72). This confirms the guilt that could be sensed previously from him, and how everything was evolving not only in his life, but also in the period and in the standards set in the century. He no longer felt responsible for what had happened in his family, and felt allowed to leave and live his life, as he had acquired his own individuality. However, the slight guilt, or sense of responsibility towards his mother, and the feeling that he had a duty to help her, had deeply affected his childhood and teenage years. Consequently, this reaffirms the importance of the role of motherhood, and the effects that a dysfunctional figure might have for a developing individual.

Finally, Marjorie can be seen as not belonging to the institution of motherhood and being a dysfunctional mother. However, because of the brain-damage, she could not prevent her behaviour. Besides, every time that she became lucid, Marjorie tried to fight back against her disease, and became nurturing and caring towards her children. Besides, even when she was in her normal state of constant wandering, she believed to achieve the expectations set on her as a woman and mother. In addition, the details provided about her life before the accident indicate that she did achieve the standards of traditional motherhood in terms of being nurturing, and of making her family happy. Therefore, even if she challenges motherhood now, she fights to be the functional mother that she once was.

2.3. An analysis of Violet

Violet, Florence's mother, can be regarded since the very beginning of the novel, to be a rather independent woman from a high status. The first hint given is very subtle but efficient; "The couple had driven away in a small car belonging to Florence's mother" (McEwan 3). This implies that this woman does not only own money, but that she is also self-sufficient. In addition, as it is a recurrent trait from people with a high economic status, Violet and her husband Geoffrey seem to have the tendency to put themselves as superior of others. An instance of this is how Florence and Edward feared their potential attitude in the wedding; "her parents had not condescended to his, as they had feared" (McEwan 3).

As an individual, Violet is described to be a "thin and bony" (McEwan 55) woman, with a degree and own career. It was not only the high economy, that made her independent, but also the experience and knowledge provided by the world of academia in which she belonged. Her experience outside her home seems to be so natural and liberating to her, that even when she is asked for advice, "she tended to adopt the public manner of the lecture hall" (McEwan 10). This implies that she struggles with putting her outside role aside to be natural and maternal. Considering Angela Davis's claims on working mothers in the decade of the sixties – as can be read in section 2 of this essay – this situation of feeling more comfortable at work than at home was something usual for educated and working mothers. "Full-time motherhood therefore provoked an ambivalent response amongst a section of educated [...] women" (Davis 148). This might explain why she seemed unable sometimes to be nurturing and heartily helpful to her daughter.

It is a fact that "the workplace changed to accommodate women, but norms in the home did not necessarily change [...], women still undertook the bulk of the homemaking and childcare duties" (D. Jones 6). Bearing this into mind, Violet's role at home seems to

be the usual according to what was expected from women at the time. Not only she puts up with her work outside home, as explained by the fact that she is caught once “marking finals all day in the heat”(McEwan 49), but she is additionally able to put up with her womanly role at home. The fact that she reminds Florence to make her bed every day, and that she criticises her way of making laundry, suggests that she has the habit to do such things herself, and also that she cannot avoid controlling how the chores are done. Therefore, she never stops being present in those tasks. Besides, the fact that Florence has already made her bed naturally every time she is reminded to, implies the matter of habit, and of having seen it modelled in her mother. This also contrasts with the dynamics of Edward’s family, as Florence’s apparently seems more functional. However, the fact that she puts up with her assumed work at home might be a consequence of her putting up with what was assumed for her gender. As explained by Rich, women of the academic community “were expected to fill both the part of the Victorian Lady of Leisure, the Angel in the House, and also of the Victorian cook, scullery maid, laundress, governess, and nurse” (Rich 59)

According to Tina Miller, “the world of work provides a temporary diversion from the otherwise all-consuming world of intensive mothering. It also offers the possibility to [...] be a different self again” (Miller 118). Yet, this affirmation does not seem to match Violet’s behaviour, as she is not seen as being able to put up with this apparent “intensive mothering”, nor her sentimental role ever during the story.

To begin with, there is her proneness to believe and put herself as superior. For instance, whenever Florence is practicing with the violin while she corrects her student’s exams, she asks her to delay her practices, believing hers of more importance. Not only that, but she uses mocking vocabulary to refer to Florence’s career, as in “I’m still not finished for today. Could you bear to delay your screeching until after tea?” (McEwan

49). The implications of the word “screeching” is of her not supporting or respecting her daughter’s passion and career. This is also applied to moments in which Florence expresses an opinion that does not match her mother’s, and so, “the sadness she affected as she heard her daughter out and then delivered her own opinion”(McEwan 52). Hence, it evidences how she is self-absorbed and consequently neglects her daughter.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Nancy Chodorow approaches the theme of motherhood in terms of psychology, and feminism. Considering that it was written in 1978, in the period in which *On Chesil Beach* is set, it really makes a contribution to the analysis of motherhood. Especially, it is relevant for Violet, as a potential reproducer of her motherly role. Therefore, the patterns in which Violet falls, are relevant for how they affect Florence, as well as evidence her dysfunctionality.

Chodorow analyses the effects of early mothering in a child, which is the base on how the mother-child relationship will become. Apart from the lack of support from Violet to Florence, a lack of communication between them can also be perceived. This, of course, is a consequence of how Violet treated her daughter in her childhood, and of how the latter consequently perceived her mother. As Chodorow explains, a child “may feel rejected and alone whether or not its mother is actually there, because it has taken as an internal object an image of her as rejecting and denying gratification” (Chodorow 43). The fact that Florence explains how she cannot rely on anyone at home, and that she must depend on a “paperback guide” (McEwan 11) for newly brides to have her womanhood questions answered, implies how she never felt her mother as someone to who she could rely on and become vulnerable. This might also be due to her mother not supporting her, and hence, feeling that she will never do. However, the fact that Violet was “too intellectual, too brittle, an old fashioned” (McEwan 10), might be an excuse for her not discussing sexual topics, but this idea can be disregarded as the background is considered.

Apart from all this, Florence's reactions, thoughts, and actions are the biggest corroboration of Violet's absence. Especially after returning from college, Florence recalled how she and Violet were detached from each other. She feels especial frustration at no one at home being able to notice her growth and began to realise that her mother had "rather objectionable political opinions" (McEwan 52). Because of this, and because she found herself often neglected, Florence learnt how not to express her opinions or feelings anymore. At that time, Florence realised "her mother's disapproval of her career [...] and therefore to Florence herself" (McEwan 49). This feeling of rejection becomes more evident for her when she recalled how distant her mother had always been, how she never "kissed or embraced Florence, even when she was small [...] Violet had barely ever touched her daughter at all" (McEwan 55). "The experience of [...] holding enables the child to develop a sense of loved self in relation to a loving and caring mother. [If] unsatisfactory, or such that the infant feels rejected or unloved, it is likely to define itself as rejected, or as someone who drives love away" (Chodorow 78). This proves how important nurture and touch is for an infant, and therefore how the lack of it can negatively affect the child. Consequently, Florence's identity was shaped in terms of her mother's influence on her, as well as her role as a young woman and potential mother, and the expectations set on her accordingly. It is relevant, also, to conclude whether she was able to distance herself from the influence of her mother, and from the expectations set on her.

As a conclusion, it could be said that Violet achieved some standards of motherhood, as we see her implicated in the chores of the house, and also trespassing what was expected as a woman at home to her daughter. However, she does not achieve the institutional expectation of a mother being nurturing and caring towards her children. Hence, achieving the standards of institutional motherhood was difficult: "The accounts of [some] theorists suggest that good maternal behavior requires both a constant delicate

assessment of infantile needs and wants and an extreme selflessness.” (Chodorow 84) However, “analysts do not consider their prescriptions difficult for most “normal” mothers to fulfil. This is because of their view of the special nature of mothers, mothering, and mother-infant relationships” (Chodorow 85). Even if this is true, she does not only challenge motherhood, but also is a dysfunctional mother.

3. Florence as a woman and potential mother

Florence, as a woman born in the 1940s, and a young adult in the 1960s, underwent and experienced the change of mentality from society towards sexuality, youth, and the expectations set on women. However, the major change of mentality provoked by the “sexual revolution” was slowly making its way, and so, it was not visible during this plot set in 1962. Therefore, as Locatelli puts it, “events might have turned out in a completely different, and less traumatic way [if] the protagonists met just a few years later” (Locatelli 237), when conversations about sex, sexual intercourse, and the difficulties that they presented were more openly talked about. Especially for Florence, in later years in which the approach to female sexuality was one of freedom, and not as limited as they were in that specific year. Because in 1962 these changes were not visible, and because the examples of marriage around her were only the traditional, Florence’s priorities at getting married were not her sexual pleasure, nor her personal growth.

Apart from by society, Florence was mainly influenced – as a young woman – by what she saw and acquired from the female figure that was most intricately connected to her. Violet, her mother, was inevitably a model for Florence in what marriage, womanhood, and motherhood concerns. Because of this, Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* is essential in the analysis of Florence, as the study approaches the notion

of how motherhood reproduces through generations. She claims that “women as wives and mothers reproduce people – physically in their housework and childcare, psychologically in their [...] maternal relation to sons and daughters. [...] Women reproduce themselves through their own daily housework” (Chodorow 36). Therefore, “an investigation of the child’s experience of being mothered shows that the fundamental expectations of women as mothers emerge during this period” (Chodorow 77). So, even if the expectations that Florence set on her role were influenced by sexuality, it was mostly influenced by what she acquired from her mother since childhood. Consequently, female sexuality nor pleasure were considered by her in her decision of getting married. Moreover, the importance that Florence gives to that stage of life is clearly stated in the beginning, as it is expressed that the couple’s “favourite topics was their childhoods, (...) and the various parental errors and outdated practices they could now forgive” (McEwan 6). Even if she is aware of some of these mistakes, some things have rooted in her, and influence her throughout life.

Given that “maternal care is crucial for the infant’s eventual ability to deal with anxiety” (Chodorow 83), and that Florence was never provided with her mother’s physical and emotional care, as we can infer from the behaviour of them both, even when she was an infant, there is no doubt of the belonging of Florence’s difficulties. Since the beginning of the novel, Florence presented hints of having low self-esteem and a lack of confidence. For instance, she evidently felt uncomfortable and disgusted at the thought and experience of touch, for which she “suspected that there was something profoundly wrong with her” (McEwan 8). This, apart from making evident that she was neglected from her mother’s touch, also evidenced how the lack of it developed in her the feeling of being rejected and unlikeable. There are many more instances of Florence speaking negatively about herself, as when she felt “shame at the prospect of disappointing

him”(McEwan 84), and when she claimed that “she disliked herself” (McEwan 84). Clearly, the feeling of rejection was present inside Florence throughout her growth, as well as the awareness of the expectations set on women, which she also identified in her mother.

“The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, [and] mutuality, comes from her mother” (Rich 218). This, as it has been discussed, was not the case for Florence, but she could somehow experience it later in life from another mother, Marjorie. Whenever it was possible for Marjorie, she showed to Florence what motherly love is. Even if Edward was worried that both women would need some sort of previous preparation prior to meeting, it turned out not to be necessary, and he found them “chatting” (McEwan 132) and cutting up pages from magazines for Marjorie’s scrapping activities. Marjorie, even with her struggles, became fond of her daughter-in-law, and was interested in her wellbeing. This feeling was reciprocated for Florence, who accepted Marjorie’s manners and flaws, and tried to be a participant in her life and hobbies. Besides, this different role model in womanhood and motherhood influenced Florence, who discovered this genuine attempt at traditional motherhood filled with nurture and love.

The pressure that Florence puts in herself and in her sexuality evidences how the society’s mentality change was progressive rather than radical. Like many other young women in the period, Florence tried to follow the standards and traditions. Part of Florence’s self-criticism was directed towards her frustration at not being able to please sexually her new husband Edward, which is linked to the fact that women were supposed to prioritise their husband’s wellbeing as well as their children’s later on. This connects with Rich’s explanation of motherhood as an institution, as it established that “all women shall remain under male control” (Rich 13). Florence had this ideology of institution

rooted in her, as is subliminally made clear by her desire to make Edward happy regardless of herself.

Nonetheless, Florence at the end is not able to overcome her difficulties or fit into the standard. She can not fit into what was established, and therefore followed her own experience. At the end, she is unable to have sexual intercourse, and so, she chooses her own sexuality over her husband's. However, because Florence loves Edward, and does not feel the connection between love and sex, she proposes Edward a sexless marriage and even allows him to have sex with other women. Even if he rejects this possibility, Florence proves how she has matured, and how she has freed herself from conventions and expectations, as she puts it: "We don't have to be like everyone" (McEwan 155). This coincides with Hsu's analysis, as he claims: "her realization that they have simply been trying to follow social conventions, and that this obedience has made them overlook each other, thus causing their dismal sexual experience" (Hsu 104). Their inability to connect sexually put an end to their brief marriage, as they do not overcome their flaws.

The failure of the protagonists' marriage is an evidence of how their dysfunctional upbringing affected their relationship. Mainly, it was their difficulty to communicate what created struggles in their relationship, which they acquired from the dynamics of both families. Besides, because of the difficulties in Edward's family, none of them was willing to create conflict, and so, their communication was scarce. In Florence's case, as it has been already explored, she could not talk about anything that worried her, nor had anyone who could guide her feelings and thoughts. As Head claims in his analysis of the novel, "their home lives, from which model experience is absent, have caused both of them to develop in ways that militate against marriage." (Head 121). Even if the experience of every mother, or family differed from what was established institutionally, there was no one in which they could rely and take as example. Especially in Florence's

case, who as a woman, had to achieve certain expectations, and who could not find any sort of support in her mother nor in her family.

4. Conclusions

In Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, the two mothers that are present in the novel have behaviours and attitudes that can be regarded as dysfunctional. Because the novel is set in 1962, the sexual revolution that favoured women had not occurred yet, and so, the role of women and mothers was still pressured into fitting in impossible standards and achieving unnatural expectations.

Marjorie's condition limited her in many ways, as she could not fulfil her role as a woman or mother. Besides, the *institution of motherhood* required her to be present in her children's lives, which she was unable to do. All of these things typically required for the mother were portrayed by the father instead, and so, the family as a whole did not fit into the standards. Even so, nothing in the story indicates that she did not achieve expectations before the accident. Moreover, in moments of lucidity, Marjorie became anxious at the awareness of not fulfilling the requirements socially set on her. Despite of her struggles, in those moments she became caring and nurturing towards them and is seen trying to redeem herself for the lost time. Bearing this in mind, she could have been regarded as a functional, and as a traditional mother if the accident had not taken place.

On the other hand, in some aspects, Violet seems to fit into the standards of traditional motherhood, as she is seen to take care of the household chores, and of instructing – or criticising -- her daughters into doing them. Moreover, she tries to put up with her role at home while being a working woman who worked also for her independence. However, she does not achieve the expectations set on her. She is cold,

distant, uncommunicative, and egocentric. Violet puts herself and her life over her daughter's passion and life, and therefore, she breaks with one of the standards of traditional motherhood.

As Florence explains, Violet was never caring or provided her with the necessary embraces or love. This, even considering the notion of experience of motherhood, not only made her untraditional, but also dysfunctional. Moreover, her behaviour and attempts to appear traditional affected Florence psychologically, and also raised a wrong idea of what motherhood was supposed to be like.

Florence, as a young woman, is the main evidence of her mother's dysfunctionality, as established by Adrienne Rich's *The Reproduction of Motherhood*. First, she has standards of motherhood that feels the need to fit in while they are not realistic. Therefore, Florence knows what she does not want to be like, while still attempting to fit into the standards. Moreover, when she meets Marjorie, she is presented into someone who tries to fit into the standards, and that actually achieves to be nurturing whenever it is possible. All of these influences make Florence set some standards that she at the end can not achieve, and which she accomplishes to differ from.

Finally, Florence, as the next generation of potential motherhood, and as a woman deeply influenced by societal standards, and by the resulting so-called dysfunctional mothers, is able to individualise herself. Because of the lack of communication in which she grew up, it is not until the end, that she is able to follow her path, in which she invites her husband, Edward. Because of the lack of communication in both families, and the different expectations set on each of them regarding their gender, they finish their marriage, but accomplish to communicate at the end, and so, they avoid the dysfunctional patterns and experiences of their family.

Taking the historical background into account is vital for an accurate analysis of the novel, or even to understand it properly. The sexual revolution that was about to take place must be considered, as it is a turning point for what it comes to womanhood, and therefore, motherhood. In fact, the plot of the novel is the way it is because of the exact year in which it is set, and hence, it would not make sense if it was set some years later. Moreover, the three characters analysed from this novel are deeply influenced by the enduring standards that still were to change, and by what was understood by the institution of motherhood. Therefore, all this makes possible a distinction between what had been established for a long time, and what was experienced by these characters just before these standards and values collapsed.

Alternatively, it might be relevant to consider further research on the cultural and psychological aspects of the novel. For instance, music is an important way to escape reality and to feel understood for the main characters. The fact that both listen to different types of music might be symbolic of each social class culture. More extensively, the music they listened and the different art that they consumed within pop culture, expressed the bases, interests, and difficulties of each class culture. Hence, Florence listens to classical music, which belonged to the high-class culture and represented exemplarity, whereas Edward listened to pop, from the lower-class culture, that talked about society and life. It might be interesting, additionally, to analyse the emergence of the new adolescence concept, and the social views on it, together with the new psychological comprehension of this life stage.

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