

‘Little Things’: Writing the Sexual Revolution

Claire O’Callaghan

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.

—Philip Larkin, ‘Annus Mirabilis’ (1967)¹

One of the most popular cultural narratives of the late twentieth century figures the period from 1960 to 1980 as an age of sexual revolution, a moment that saw a shift in social mores concerning sexual permissiveness and British sexual attitudes. But what specifically the term ‘sexual revolution’ means, ‘when it began (if it did), to whom it applied, and what changes it wrought’ are ‘highly contested subjects’.² As the epigraph to this chapter indicates (albeit facetiously), for Philip Larkin, the start of the sexual revolution can be pinpointed precisely to 1963, a year preceded by the infamous *Lady Chatterley* trial of 1960, in which the re-issue of D. H. Lawrence’s 1928 novel faced charges of obscenity, and the release of The Beatles’s debut album *Please, Please Me*, the title song of which was accused of being an ode to oral sex.³ For Margaret Drabble, however, *when* precisely the sexual revolution began was less clear. But

¹ Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Archie Burnett (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 90.

² Jeffrey Escoffier, ‘Introduction’, *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003), xi-xxxvi, p. xii.

³ See Barry Lenser’s discussion on this point at *Pop Matters*, <<http://www.popmatters.com/post/please-please-me/>>, accessed 10th October 2015.

writing in *The Guardian* in 1967, Drabble asserted that by the mid-1960s it was ‘no longer possible to deny’ the ‘certainty of sexual revolution’ because of ‘the development of contraceptive techniques’.⁴ For Drabble, the advent of the Pill meant that women were ‘free now, as never before’, and their ability to take control of their fertility was ‘the final clause in the contract, the clinching argument’ for women’s liberation.⁵ Meanwhile, Angela Carter stated that it was not until 1969 that ‘the production of more or less 100 per cent effective methods of birth control, combined with the relaxation of manners that may have been derived from this technological innovation or else came from God knows where, changed, well, everything’.⁶ These writers may have had differing views on when the sexual revolution commenced, but as Carter suggests, its effects ultimately ‘changed [...] everything’ because it enabled individuals to make personal choices about their bodies and (sex) lives as never before.⁷ The notion of choice may seem a small gain when situated within a much broader socio-historical cultural context, but as Sheila Rowbotham states, ‘Revolutions are about little things. Little things which happen to you all the time, every day, wherever you go, all your life.’⁸

Larkin’s poem also indicates how the sexual liberalism of society filtered through to British bedrooms on the back of a broad range of changes and socio-cultural discourses that had an impact on gendered and sexual behaviour. His tongue-in-cheek ‘Annus Mirabilis’ (1967) captures the classic narrative of the sexual revolution: the ‘sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll’,

⁴Margaret Drabble, ‘The Sexual Revolution’, *The Guardian* (11 October 1967), <http://www.theguardian.com/books/1967/oct/11/society>, accessed 10 September 2015.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Angela Carter, ‘Truly, It Felt like Year One’, *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960s*, ed. Sara Maitland (London: Virago, 1988), 206-219: pp. 213-214.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 213-214.

⁸ Sheila Rowbotham, ‘Women: The Struggle for Freedom’, *Black Dwarf* 13:9 (10 January 1969), 6-7: p. 6.

imagery that, as Jeffrey Escoffier notes, ‘sum[s] up the counter-culture of the sixties and seventies’.⁹ But other discourses that engendered a change in the sexual climate included the growth in advertising and popular media which ‘eschewed Victorian proprieties in describing [...] sexual experience’; the publication of more ‘sexually titillating images’ for ‘male readers’ expressed most notoriously through the emergence of Page 3 in *The Sun* newspaper in 1969 (bought by Rupert Murdoch in that year); the increase in screenings of hard-core sex films in cinemas and theatres across the UK; the opening of private clubs for group sex as well as the heightened visibility of gay bars and bathhouses across the country; and the cultural climate of ‘free love’ associated with the 1960s counter-culture and hippy movement.¹⁰

That the period from 1960 to 1980 ultimately brought about vast social and cultural change in attitudes to sex – and particularly to women’s lives – is undisputed. As Drabble and Carter’s points indicate, the sexual revolution coupled with the gains of the women’s liberation movement, which was focused on the varied ways in which women faced oppression in patriarchal society and the creation of a renewed socio-political consciousness with which to fight it, enabled significant strides in women’s ownership of their bodies. Such changes are evidenced through the legalisation of abortion in 1967, the introduction of marital breakdown as grounds for divorce in the Divorce Reform Act of 1969 and, as noted, the first—albeit tightly restricted—introduction of the contraceptive pill across the UK. Concurrently women also began to be able to express their sexuality and desires more freely. Famously, if not rather scandalously, in 1962, the journalist Helen Gurley Brown encouraged ‘nice single wom[e]n’

⁹ Escoffier, ‘Introduction’, p. xi.

¹⁰ David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War—The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History* (New York and London: Little, Brown, 2000), pp. 4-5.

to say 'yes to sex', urging them to lose their virginity early and to resist marriage.¹¹ In *Sex and the Single Girl* Gurley Brown noted that 'theoretically' single women should have 'no sex life' at all, but that this was 'nonsense': 'she has a better sex life than most of her married friends'.¹²

The single woman, Gurley Brown claims:

[n]eed never be bored with one man per lifetime. Her choice of partners is endless and they seek her. They never come to her bed duty-bound. Her married friends refer to her pursuers as wolves, but actually many of them turn out to be lambs – to be shorn and worn by her.¹³

The vivacity with which Gurley Brown conceives of the single woman's sexual liberation foregrounds the sense of excitement and possibility that the sexual revolution brought about more broadly, and what her text really captures is the importance of choice in sexual matters. But is her enthusiasm for sexual choice reflected in and across literary writings of the period? Is her eagerness for sexual freedom articulated equally by both male and female writers? Is the pace at which she perceived change evident in their fictions? And to what extent does other literary writing of the period suggest that the sexual revolution truly effected change in sexual equality and private sexual behaviour?

Taking such questions as its point of departure, this essay not only explores the ways in which literature of the period articulates the shifting sexual landscape, but also considers how such writings exemplify the differences in sexual freedom that men and women experienced in this time of transition, and the different effects that sexual permissiveness produced. I propose that the way in which male and female authors represent the lived

¹¹ Helen Gurley Brown, 'Women Alone? Oh, Come Now!' from *Sex and the Single Girl*, *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003), 70-77: p. 73.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹³ *Ibid.*

experience of the sexual revolution—the ‘little things’, to borrow Rowbotham’s term—exposes a gulf between the very public changes in sexual practices and behaviours brought about in Westminster and the lived reality of private sexual practices and attitudes towards them. In fictions of the period concerned with heterosexual relations, not only is sexual permissiveness greeted with caution but there is a distinct difference in how men and women are shown to respond to changes in sexual mores. While men are frequently shown to exercise sexual choice freely and indulge in a range of liberal behaviour, women, by contrast, remain limited by traditional views of how they *should* conduct themselves, even when they are legally ‘entitled’ to exercise the same agency and choice in sexual matters. Considering works by Martin Amis, Bill Naughton, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Forster and Iris Murdoch, I propose that these British fictions suggest the hedonism of the sexual revolution to be a deeply misleading myth and that the large scale legislative changes in sexuality that shaped the period 1960-80 only acquired their impact through the accretion of small-scale transitions in people’s private lives.

I can’t get no satisfaction?

The notion that the sexual revolution liberated men and women from traditional sexual mores is greeted with scepticism on the part of many. Cultural critics and historians such as Jeffrey Weeks and Jane Lewis have argued that heterosexual sexual behaviour remained largely conservative during the period, thus calling into question the extent to which the term ‘sexual revolution’ can be deployed at all.¹⁴ The historian Dominic Sandbrook contends that although

¹⁴ See Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Pearson, 1981, 1989), p. 254; Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain Since 1945: Women, Family, Work and the State Since 1945* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), p. 48.

‘the national mood’ fostered a sense of ‘optimistic hedonism’, ‘the reality of daily life was rather different’ and real ‘change came slowly’.¹⁵

The disjunction Sandbrook articulates—between a mood of ‘optimistic hedonism’ and the reality of ‘progressive’ change—is paramount in Martin Amis’s first novel, *The Rachel Papers* (1973). The novel exemplifies the different ways in which men and women experienced the liberalising practices of the sexual revolution. Narrated by the obnoxious and self-aggrandising 19-year-old Charles Highway, Amis’s text describes ‘the ubiquitous obsession of all nineteen-year-olds, getting another nineteen-year-old into bed’,¹⁶ and the subject of Charles’s pursuit is fellow student, Rachel Noyes. Amis has frequently been critiqued for his ‘testosterone-driven narrative[s]’,¹⁷ but as James Diedrick argues, the challenge with *The Rachel Papers* is that, while it ‘vividly captures masculine [sexual] appetite’ and ‘brilliant[ly] render[s] male misogyny’, it is ‘not always clear where satirized sexism ends and authorial antifeminism begins’.¹⁸

Charles Highway may have a ‘rangy, well-travelled, big-cocked name’ but he is, by his own admission, ‘none of these’ things (7).¹⁹ He is an average male teenager of ‘medium-length’ and ‘arseless’, with a ‘waistless figure’, ‘corrugated ribcage’ and ‘bandy legs’ that ‘gang up to dispel any hint of aplomb’ (7). Yet in his titular Rachel Papers—the set of notes that he works

¹⁵ Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Little, Brown, 2006), p. xvii.

¹⁶ Elie A. Edmondson, ‘Martin Amis Writes Postmodern Man’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42:2 (2001), 145-154: p. 145.

¹⁷ James L. Miracky, “‘Hope Lost or Hyped Lust’: Gendered Representations of Britain in Margaret Drabble’s *The Radiant Way* and Martin Amis’s *Money*’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44.2 (2003), 136-43: p. 143.

¹⁸ James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 20.

¹⁹ Martin Amis, *The Rachel Papers* (London: Vintage, 2012). Page numbers are given in the text.

on throughout the novel that details instructions on all aspects of life but mainly on how to seduce girls—Charles describes with candour the detail of his sexual experiences. However, to comedic effect, his sexual proclivities are led by what he has learned from various ‘sex-technique handbooks’ (70), Amis’s proverbial nod to Alex Comfort’s *The Joy of Sex* which was published in 1972, the year before *The Rachel Papers*. Charles has ‘annotated’ his ‘sex manual’ heavily, so that one day he and Rachel might ‘churn the [bed] sheets in locomotive lust’ (83). The satirical tone of Amis’s prose foregrounds the disjunction between the sexual frankness of such a text and the ontology of sex for (teenage) subjects like Charles. For example, although he is ‘schooled’ by techniques in his various ‘handbooks’ (70), Charles can only enact their advice to clinical effect. Lying with Rachel on his bed, he reflects on the ‘two things you can do’ when ‘normally’ kissing your partner: ‘extricate your mouth, grin with it, and say something (necessarily) cinematic; or move on to the neck, throat and ears’ (99). Likewise, when thinking about what to do next, he describes the importance of maintaining ‘triparte sexual application in contrapuntal patterns’, that is, stroking Rachel’s stomach and breasts (100). As Allyn notes, such ‘guidebooks’ evince ‘a certain nonchalance’ about their subject-matter that nonetheless combines ‘the hang-ups of conventional society and the over eagerness of recent converts to sexual freedom’.²⁰ This sense is captured by Amis, but in Charles’ world—his Rachel Papers—the disjunction primarily manifests itself as a ‘difference’ between teenage and post-teenage sex: teenage sex is ‘not something you do, just something you get done’ (22).

Similarly Charles’s sexual expectations are shaped by the torrid descriptions of sex in Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Referring to his anticipation of coitus, Charles tells the reader that he ‘know[s] what it’s supposed to be like’ because ‘I’ve read my Lawrence’, but in

²⁰ Allyn, *Make Love, Not War*, p. 229.

practice with Rachel ‘the Lawrentiana’ never really begins (148-149). Instead, the reality of their first sexual encounter is merely ‘an aggregate of pleasureless detail, nothing more; an insane, gruelling, blow-by-blow obstacle course’ (149). The notion of sexual permissiveness may characterise contemporary conceptions of the sexual revolution, but in Amis’s novel sex—or at least teenage sex—is rather routine.

Charles’s perfunctory sexual experience is mirrored in other texts of the period, most notably Margaret Drabble’s *The Millstone* (1965) and Margaret Forster’s *Georgy Girl* (1965), both of which focus on their female protagonist’s first experience of sex. In *The Millstone*, Rosamund Stacey’s first (and only) sexual encounter is not only disappointing but reticent. Having met her friend George at the pub, they return to Rosamund’s flat. The experience itself is painful and over quickly:

I managed to smile bravely, in order not to give offence, despite considerable pain, and I hoped that the true state of affairs would not become obvious. I remember that he stroked my hair, just before, and said in his oh so wonderfully polite and chivalrous way,

Is this all right? Are you all right, will this be all right?

I knew what he meant and, eyes shut, I smiled and nodded, and then that was it and it was over. (30)²¹

Unlike the account from Amis’s egotistical protagonist, Drabble’s sex scene is unflinchingly conservative. That Rosamund shuts her eyes, eludes George’s intimate questions and effectively silences herself denotes a shyness and inhibition that rejects any notion of the sexual curiosity or hedonism typically associated with sexual permissiveness.

²¹ Margaret Drabble, *The Millstone* (London: Penguin, 1965). Page numbers are given in the text.

Likewise in Forster's novel, George (aka Georgy) has an equally unpleasant first sexual encounter. Georgy is 'so excited' about her first time with Jos, her friend Meredith's partner (a point I shall return to), that she clings to him rather too eagerly (117).²² She understands that sex 'should all have been so right' because '[s]he was relaxed and wanting him, every nerve quivered with eagerness':

But as he penetrated her, gasping with haste, he could feel her flinch and contract. He felt it but could do nothing about it, he was too preoccupied with his own climax. He wanted to reassure her, to stop, to go more slowly, but he couldn't contain himself and he had to go on, leaving her suffering behind him.

She lay and wept. Exhausted, he wanted to turn over and go to sleep. He needed to gather strength to sooth and silence her.

'Sssh', he said. 'It will be all right. It sometimes happens like that the first time'. He couldn't actually remember it ever happening before [...].

'It didn't with Meredith,' sobbed George. 'I asked her once and she said it was an old wives' tale that it hurt. She said it was marvellous the first time.' (117-18)

For both of these women, the perception of sex is something far more exciting than the reality of their first experience. Neither quite captures the pleasure and exhilaration of sex proffered by Gurley Brown or even Larkin. On the contrary, in each of these novels, sex for these young women is quite literally an anti-climax.

Yet, despite Charles's, Rosamund's and George's cursory sexual experiences, the women in Amis's novel in particular *do* experience sexual pleasure, something missing from many of the other texts under consideration in this chapter. Within his quite obviously embellished Rachel Papers, Charles's words betray a sexual egotism at the expense of women

²² Margaret Forster, *Georgy Girl* (London: Vintage, 2005). Page numbers are given in the text.

whom he persistently diminishes in sexual terms, but his female partners at least experience orgasm (or so he believes). With his first girlfriend Gloria, for example, Charles notes that:

It wasn't that bad, as I remember, not significantly worse than usual. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes trying not to come, with a beady dread of what was going to happen when I did; a decent (i.e. perceptible) orgasm; a further two or three minutes in garrotted detumescence. Cock attains regulation minimum and is supplanted by well-manicured thumb; Gloria has another ... five? orgasms; and so it ends. I roll over. (23)

The comedic yet over-zealous tone of Charles's words amplify the ridiculousness of his sexual self-conviction. His comment that his performance wasn't 'significantly worse than usual' is ironic given his admission that Gloria is his first girlfriend. Amis's use of ellipsis both gestures to Charles's perceived sexual dexterity and yet calls into question its reality and the veracity of Gloria's '... five?' orgasms. But despite its questionable truth, *The Rachel Papers* at least recognises the significance of sexual gratification—something that Alfred Kinsey's famous empiricism deemed a quantitative marker of changing sexual practices in the mid-twentieth century²³—and of female sexual pleasure in particular. Indeed, despite William Masters and Virginia Johnson's scientific studies of 1966 and Anne Koedt's infamous *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* (1970),²⁴ both of which rejected Freud's theory of the vaginal orgasm in favour of an emphasis on the centrality of the clitoris for women's sexual pleasure, female

²³ Kinsey's two famous empirical investigations—*Sexual Behaviour in the Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Female* (1953)—were path-breaking studies on sexual behaviour and were, in their day, the most extensive survey of human sexual behaviour yet undertaken.

²⁴ Masters and Johnson pioneered research into the human sexual response. In works such as *Human Sexual Response* (1966), *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970) and *The Pleasure Bond* (1974), they not only stressed the significance of clitoral stimulation in female orgasm but explored multiple orgasms and the insignificance of the penis in female sexual pleasure.

orgasm (except for lucky Gloria) is a notable omission in British fictions of the period. In spite of the liberalising effect of the sexual revolution on sexual practices, sexual pleasure, it seems, for British writers, remained primarily the preserve of men.

Sexual politics

In a similar yet different vein, Bill Naughton's disturbingly chauvinistic novel *Alfie* (1966) is primarily concerned with the politics of sex and the morality of pre-marital, extra-marital and non-monogamous sexual relationships. Changes in sexual partnering away from dominant conceptions of monogamous sex are a dominant trope of the sexual revolution.²⁵ The radio play on which Naughton's novel was based, *Alfie Elkins and His Little Life*, which aired in January 1962 and which, through its title, recalls Rowbotham's conception of 'little things', was deemed 'offensive' and 'revolting' for its portrayal of non-monogamous sexual practice and unreconstructed heterosexual male attitudes to sex, but nonetheless it was developed into a successful stage production before then being re-written as a novel.²⁶ Often cited as 'an example of progressive liberalisation', Naughton's text charts the 'amorous wanderings'²⁷ of a 'working-class Don Juan'²⁸ whose womanising ways leave a trail of hurt and abandoned females in his wake. These include Gilda, the abandoned mother of Alfie's son, Malcolm, and Lily, a married woman who has to resort to an illegal abortion in Alfie's seedy London flat after a casual one-off liaison. Notably, whereas Amis's novel, in spite of its sexism, affords women a position as subject (a less than satisfactory one, but they are granted names at least),

²⁵ For more on changes in patterns of sexual partnering in the period, see Allyn, *Make Love, Not War*, chs 8 and 17.

²⁶ Tony Algate, 'What's it all about Alfie?', *History Today* 46:10 (1996), 50-55: p. 50.

²⁷ Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 2005), p. 96.

²⁸ Roger Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 143.

Alfie, with its tongue-in-cheek tone that invites the reader to reflect on the seriousness of the narrator, nonetheless problematically refers to women as objects: women are ‘it’, ‘bird’, ‘bint’ or ‘gal’ to him (9, 17, 19, 26, 27, 29, 41).²⁹ Indeed, extending this pejorative attitude, *Alfie* reflects a patriarchal attitude to sex that is, on the one hand, reflective of the sense of permissiveness of the sexual revolution, and on the other, redolent of male sexual chauvinism. For instance, Alfie is honest with his female lovers that he is ‘not the marrying sort’ (51), and yet he is strategically hypocritical towards love. When it suits him he lies to women and tells them he loves them, but he later advises that ‘once a woman gets too hot, that’s the time to cool off’ (18). Moreover, Alfie cautions the implied reader ‘never [to] tell a woman you love em’; instead, men should ‘string em along’ (25). In other words, Naughton’s novel reflects the concern of feminist scholars from the period such as Kate Millett that ‘sexual politics’—that is, the ‘power structured relationships’ between men and women—reinforce the questionable idea that women are always ‘governed by another’; that they are ‘subordinate’ to men who are ‘dominant’.³⁰ In this way *Alfie* exposes sexual hypocrisy but also foregrounds the pressures on women that expose the very limits of sexual liberation. As Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell put it:

In the era of flower-power and love-ins, of doing your own thing and not being hung up (especially about sex) ‘girls’ were expected to do it, and impose no conditions. The more they did it, the more ‘liberated’ they were deemed to be. It is true that the sixties’ counter-culture challenged a lot of old ideas and allowed new ones to blossom; thus far, it nourished the roots of emergent feminism. But at the same time it added a new dimension to the oppression of women—setting them up, in their mini-skirts and

²⁹ Bill Naughton, *Alfie* (London: Allison and Busby, 2012). Page numbers are given in the text.

³⁰ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* [1969] (New York: First Illinois, 2000), p. 23.

mascara, alongside the wholefoods and hippy beads and hallucinogens, in a gallery of new toys with which men were now free to play.³¹

Extending such concerns, other fictions of the period expose power in relation to the upheaval of sexual morality. The rejection of sexual traditions is a provocative theme in Forster's *Georgy Girl* and Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head* (1961), both of which, also explore pre-marital and extra-marital sex but in the context of non-traditional sexual relations.

In Forster's novel, a bildungsroman focusing on the teenage Georgy's first experience of love and sex, the titular George is propositioned by James, her non-biological 'Uncle', to become his mistress. She is, at this point in the novel, still a virgin, and the proposition from James is her first sexual advance. The offer James presents Georgy with is an incredibly formal one: 'What I propose is an agreement whereby either one of the contracting parties is free to opt out at any time, without notice, during a six months' initial period, and then at a month's notice thereafter' (46). Initially, James's words appear redolent of the increased sexual freedom afforded to men and women precisely *because* of the sexual revolution, especially because he emphasises Georgy's consent and choice. But behind the veil of equality, the proposal merely reframes the power relations between men and women that are embedded in sexual relationships. The formal 'agreement' *is* a proposal, a "business" one, so to speak, but one designed to enable James's sexual freedoms and dictate up front how *he* means to address any consequences, such as an unwanted pregnancy (to which he advises Georgy's, he'll financially support any adoption). As James puts it, in his view such an agreement is 'always the best way', but the implicit notion behind his words is that previous casual liaisons that have not included such a contract have ended messily (47).

³¹ Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation* (London: Picador, 1982), pp. 19-20.

In Murdoch's *A Severed Head*, partner 'swapping' is the norm. The novel exposes the selfish effects of possessing multiple partners concurrently. In the novel, the protagonist, Martin Lynch-Gibbon, has an affair with Georgie Hands; Martin's wife, Antonia, has an affair with Martin's friend, Palmer Anderson; Antonia also desires Alexander, Martin's brother; Alexander has a relationship with Georgie before moving onto Antonia. Via this unwieldy 'triangle', Murdoch suggests that such an intimate exchange of sexual partnering is 'incomprehensible as a tangible state'.³² The complexity of 'sexual patterning' in Murdoch's novel is, I suggest, intentionally farcical, but it also—like Forster's novel—demonstrates partner-swapping of the sexual revolution to be rapid and/or circumvented by emotional, psychological, or physical complexity.³³ Via the configuration of sexual partnering in Murdoch's text, the novel articulates the freedom associated with sexual permissiveness but suggest that mutually consenting casual sexual relations may not be as successful as its myths imply.

Contraception and the outcomes of sexual permissiveness

Returning to Drabble and Carter's observations at the start of this chapter, the expanded contraception options open to men and women were an important feature of the sexual revolution and this issue is a prominent feature in writings from the period.³⁴ In *The Rachel Papers*, Charles's first sexual encounter with Rachel is marked by her revelation that she is

³² Miranda Seymour, 'Introduction', *A Severed Head* by Iris Murdoch (London: Vintage, 2001), vii -xii: p. xii.

³³ Ibid, p. xii.

³⁴ Although this chapter is focused on British texts, Mary McCarthy's novel *The Group* (1963) is also an important point of reference on this topic. Chapters two and three of the novel famously describe Dottie's first sexual experience—including her experience of orgasm—and her subsequent visit to the family planning clinic for contraception.

‘not on the pill’ (150-151). Importantly, Amis gestures towards Rachel’s sexual autonomy when noting that it was ‘on Rachel’s suggestion, after some tweedy humming and ha-ing from me, we decided that we’d jolly well go up—fuck them all—and buy some contraceptives at the late-night chemist in Marble Arch’, but what the scene really comes back to is Charles’s anxiety about condoms because ‘I had never used a sheath before’, something Amis reinforces later when Charles, in a rather cringe-worthy moment, is shown recycling a used condom from a dustbin in preparation for sex with another partner (150-151). Meanwhile, in Naughton’s novel, while Alfie benefits from the liberalising of culture with regards to his own sexual choices, he is dismissive of scientific advances to prevent unwanted pregnancies, namely the Pill. Alfie’s view is that ‘[t]hey can say what they want about the Pill and one thing and another but one of the greatest reliefs a man can have—or a woman come to that—is to let Nature take its course’ (44). Alfie’s tone here is, of course, somewhat ironic, but nonetheless Naughton’s reflects Sandbrook’s observation that ‘many of the best-known changes of the period, like [...] the development of the Pill, provoked considerable unease or anger in some sections of the population.’³⁵

Contraception does not always prevent pregnancy and many of the texts discussed here consider the various options open to sexual partners when unplanned pregnancy ensues. In *Georgy Girl*, for instance, James tells Georgy upfront that he will ‘bear all the expense [...] and undertake the formal adoption of any children’ (46). Adoption remains one option for men and women who face the prospect of an unwanted pregnancy. But, as noted earlier, the legalization of abortion in 1967 granted women for the first time the capacity to exercise agency over their own bodies and sexual practices. Yet in spite of this, women continued to face judgment and prejudice when faced with unexpected pregnancy. As Hera Cook indicates,

³⁵ Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p. xvii.

if a woman became pregnant and could not marry, her sexual activity became public and society punished her for this. Having an abortion was illegal. Having an illegitimate baby was highly stigmatized and women concealed the fact as desperately as people did a criminal record.³⁶

This shifting cultural context and sexual double standard is given prominence in Drabble's *The Millstone*. Here Rosamund observes that she cannot 'face the prospect of speculation, anyone's speculation' that she is pregnant because of the shame and guilt she feels about any public discussion of her sex life; thus she resolves to 'get on with it' by herself 'as best [she can]' (34-35). Rosamund recognises that she has 'to face the problem of publicity' since it is 'not the kind of event one can conceal forever', but she is apprehensive about telling family and friends because she does not want to 'cause trouble' and does 'not quite know how to impart the news' (39-40). Rosamund's fear echoes Noel Annan's observation that the sexual revolution was not quite 'years of innocence, but years of ignorance'³⁷ in which 'illegitimate births, illegal abortions, shotgun marriages and disastrous relationships' were often the consequence of the liberalising of sex.³⁸

Although Rosamund opts to have her baby, other fictions reflect debates concerning the legislative changes for abortion, and specifically the problem of illegal back street abortions.³⁹ In Forster's text, George reflects on the frequency of illegal abortions: '[a]s far as she knew, Meredith had disposed of four altogether' and, on the most recent occasion, has

³⁶ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 282.

³⁷ Noël Annan, *Our Age: The Generation That Made Post-War Britain* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 184.

³⁸ Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p. 479.

³⁹ See, for example, Lynne Reid Banks' *The L-Shaped Room* (1960), or Doris Lessing's memoir *In Pursuit of the English* (1960).

asked to borrow £20 from George. When George tries to refuse, and encourages her to have the baby, Meredith responds by threatening to get ‘some dirty old woman to do it with a pair of knitting needles’ (77). Here, George places pressure on Meredith to ‘have the baby’, and her words echo traditional and religious anti-conservative perspectives from the picture. Meredith’s response, meanwhile, articulates the limited options available to women prior to the 1967 abortion act, namely, unofficial means of termination. Likewise, as Mark Donnelly notes, Naughton’s *Alfie* ‘brought to wider public attention’ the fact that there was such a ‘market for [...] dangerous and degrading operations’.⁴⁰ Alfie’s one-time encounter with his friend’s Harry’s wife, Lily, results in pregnancy. In the novel, the abortionist ‘reminds’ Alfie and Lily of ‘the seriousness of the case’:

‘To terminate a pregnancy after more than twenty-eight days is a criminal offence—punishable in a court of law by seven year’ imprisonment. Do you both understand? [...]. Not only that, but’s a crime against the unborn child. It’s a sin against Nature.’
(214)

Despite his ‘preaching’, the abortionist accepts the money the pair pays him for his service, even trying to raise the price at the scene, something Alfie cynically observes means that ‘[a]ll that he’d said to us would sound very good in a court of law’ (219). Alfie remains outside the room while Lily undergoes the procedure performed by the ‘quack’ doctor, but hearing her sudden ‘cry of pain in the next room’ (224) causes him to reflect on his contribution in the events that led to her pregnancy: ‘You’re a right cow-son, Alfie, I said to myself’ (225). Nonetheless, Alfie’s ‘remorse’ does not stop him from ‘giv[ing] her a good slap across the cheek’ (225) when Lily cries out in pain after the procedure. Nor does it stop him abandoning

⁴⁰ Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p. 121.

her in his flat when she's struggling, telling her '[y]ou'll be better on your own [...] It's one of those things where nobody can help you' (265).

Indeed, Alfie's lack of contrition contrasts with Murdoch's portrayal of Martin in *A Severed Head*. Georgie had been pregnant with Martin's child but he had abandoned her once his affair became public knowledge. Martin suggests that the affair ends 'in relieved embraces and champagnes', but Murdoch questions his perspective (176).⁴¹ Instead, it becomes apparent that Martin had used Georgie sexually only for his brother to do the same, the consequence of which leads directly to Georgie's mental fragility. Martin, Murdoch implies, was not only ignorant of the effect of his actions, but fails to recognise the near-fatal consequences for Georgie:

I seemed again to hear her voice saying, 'Martin, you don't know how near to the edge I am'. Indeed, there was so much I did not know, had not cared to know. Georgie's stoicism had helped to make me a brute. She had so cunningly spared me her feelings. I had enjoyed but never had to pay. But someone had paid. As I looked down at her slim inert body I recalled [...] the nightmare of her pregnancy [...] If she died, I had killed her. (176)

Martin's words not only gestures to a degree of futility in sexual permissiveness and its consequences but elucidate a sense of victim blaming that draws attention to the sexual double standard. The 'incestuous' sexual exchange between Martin, Georgie, Alexander, Antonia and Palmer has unexpected outcomes for all of them, but in this case, more poignantly, George's attempted suicide (the cuttings of her hair symbolically forming the severed head of the title). For Murdoch, the abandonment of responsibility in the sexual exchange of partners is rarely without a cost; as Martin reflects, 'someone had paid' (176) and in this case it is Georgie, the

⁴¹ Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (London: Vintage, 2001). Page numbers are given in the text.

young female academic who is helplessly ‘passed’ between brothers in their selfish sexual relationships.

Conclusion

Arthur Marwick famously described the ‘liberal hour’ of the 1960s as heralding the ‘end of Victorianism’.⁴² The novels under consideration in this essay suggest that while the period 1960-1980 was undoubtedly characterised by optimism and real changes were brought about, the vibrancy, excitement and freedom of sexual permissiveness and the liberalising of sexual attitudes did not always find expression in private sexual practice. The novels by Amis, Naughton, Murdoch, Forster and Drabble acknowledge that there was a revolution in sexual attitudes and behaviours: pre-marital and extra-marital sex are visible, birth control is shown to be more accessible, cheaper and more respectable than before, and ‘general attitudes were unquestionably loosening’.⁴³ Even when the sex is not very good, it is being written about with more frankness and candour. However, these novels also represent the persistence of sexual double standards between men and women, and the enduring power of gender stereotypes that inform and help maintain an imbalance of power between the sexes. Indeed, despite the sexual revolution, the various texts discussed here suggest that little real impact is discernible in women’s lives and on their ability to control their bodies and lives.

Perhaps of all the novels, Drabble’s *The Millstone* offers the most liberal assessment of the outcomes of the sexual revolution. Rosamund not only goes through with her pregnancy and gives birth to baby Octavia, but does so on her own terms: she decides not to involve the baby’s father after their (uneventful) one night stand and, most importantly, she goes on to have

⁴² Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Social and Cultural Transformation in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, 1958-74* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp 141-153.

⁴³ Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p. 499.

a successful career. Drabble does not romanticise the success of Rosamund's choices: she does not tell her parents of her situation by the novel's close, nor is the resurrection of her academic career easily achieved. Yet the very fact that she is able to make such choices is Drabble's take-home point; sexual choice is a 'little thing', as Rowbotham suggested, but perhaps it was the most important consequence of the sexual revolution.