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"the harmless deceptions of male companionship": Sexuality and Male Homosocial Desire in Patrick McGinley’s Bogmail

by MOIRA CASEY

ALTHOUGH PATRICK MCGINLEY’s first novel, Bogmail (1978), was critically well received, none of the reviewers or literary critics have broached the issue of male homosocial desire. In fact, the few McGinley critics hint at some of the characters’ sexual neuroses, but none give full attention to the issues of homosociality and homoeroticism that pervade novels such as Bogmail and The Trick of the Ga Bolga. Richard E. Brown, in a discussion of the ways in which McGinley’s novels evade the conventions of the detective genre, acknowledges that “McGinley’s detectives are driven to assume the role [of detective] out of personal desperation, and if they share the traditional detective’s isolation and misanthropy, their (often ineffectual) investigations reflect complex anxieties” (209). Indeed, McGinley’s characters’ anxieties are compellingly complex, and these anxieties are frequently illustrated by what Thomas F. Shea refers to as McGinley’s “disturbingly direct presentations of gender conflict, misogyny, and physical violence” (15). With Bogmail, such anxieties, particularly as they relate to gender conflict, misogyny and physical violence, may be better understood by an exploration of the homosocial desire that connects the protagonist, Roarty, to a variety of characters in the novel. McGinley’s dark imagination is often conveyed through his characters’ understanding (or noticeable lack thereof) of the homosocial bond and its ironies, and thus such an exploration (as many of my examples will show) can also offer readers a more thorough understanding of McGinley’s brand of dark Irish humor.

At the heart of Bogmail lies an intensely homosocial world in which the “deceptions of male companionship” are anything but “harmless” (McGinley 244). The novel abounds in male-male relationships through which the characters attempt to work out their psychological problems. These relationships fuel the plot of the novel and are often highly charged, turbulent and even violent struggles for knowledge and power. But at the same time, the male characters are also seeking from each other supportive male friendship, intellectual stimulation, and psychological understanding. The world of western Ireland as it is portrayed in Bogmail is a highly traditionally-structured soci-

1. Some of McGinley’s positive reviews have come from J.C.C. Mays, Patricia Craig, and Rhoda Koenig, among others. Mays describes the novel as “strikingly well-written” and admits that McGinley “explores states of mind with exactitude,” but he fails to elaborate on the intricacies of these states of mind.
ety which favors conventional heterosexual relationships—i.e., marital and potentially procreative—over extramarital and/or non-procreative sexual relationships. The male-male social relationships, however, clearly occupy a more favored position over the male-female relationships. Using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussion of the male homosocial continuum from *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, I will examine this hierarchy and the interplay between these types of relationships in *Bogmail*.

The plot of the novel is incited by local pub-owner Tim Roarty’s inability to accept his employee’s heterosexual relationship with his (Roarty’s) daughter Cecily. The relationship between Eales and Cecily never is depicted adequately for the reader, but Roarty’s obsession over his daughter’s sexuality, whether real or the result of projection on his part, and the related issue of Eales’s sexuality, clearly inspire Roarty’s desperate actions. In fact, Eamonn Eales’s sexual orientation and appetite (represented and commodified by the pornographic magazines and advertisements Roarty discovers in his room) seem to Roarty nearly evidence enough to justify his subsequent murder of Eales. Although (and perhaps even because) Roarty’s daughter Cecily is conspicuously absent from Donegal, she functions as the object of desire for these two rivals, Roarty and Eales. To use René Girard’s term for the rivalrous relationship, the action of *Bogmail* is incited by a “triangle of desire” in which the two rivals for the object are connected to each other in a relationship that is more intense than the relationship with the object of desire.

What I propose to do in this paper is to read the homosocial and heterosexual relationships in the novel through the framework of Sedgwick’s rewriting of Girard’s erotic triangles. *Bogmail* seems to be particularly fertile literary ground for an examination of how, in Sedgwick’s words, “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence” (6). The homosocial politics of *Bogmail* are decidedly complex; the overarching patriarchal institution of the Catholic Church is, at varying times, undermined or reaffirmed by the male characters’ homosocial bond. One of my goals is to examine the “special relationship” between the homosocial groupings of characters and the deployment of patriarchal power particularly as it relates to sexuality within the novel.

Sedgwick uses the term “homosocial” to describe “social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1). In *Between Men*, she hypothesizes an unbroken continuum between the homosocial and homosexual, a continuum that results from the potentially erotic desire at play in the homosocial world. She defines desire as “analogous to the psychoanalytic use of ‘libido’—not for a particu-

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2. Roarty has sent Cecily away to a convent school, and as the action of the novel takes place, she is in London on vacation.
lar affective state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (2). Such important relationships are not limited to those between individuals, but can also include the relationships between the individual and the societal (for our purposes, patriarchal) institutions and forces that influence the individual. The Girardian erotic triangle, then, becomes not just a static and symmetrical chart of two male rivals, but a “sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment” (Sedgwick 27). I would argue that the social circle of Roarty’s patrons, the local Canon and the Catholic Church, and even the capitalistic ventures within the plot all attempt in various ways to enforce a heterosexual, marital and procreative norm. By charting the characters of *Bogmail* in their movement within a complex system of Girardian relationships, we can examine the ways in which these individuals negotiate with their society and with each other for empowerment.

The protagonist, local pub-owner Tim Roarty, murders his bartender, buries the body in a nearby bog, and is later blackmailed, or “bogmailed,” by an unknown person who has dug up the body. Roarty spends much of the rest of the novel trying to determine who is blackmailing him, while other characters are trying to determine who has murdered the bartender. Roarty suspects that Potter, an Englishman visiting Glenkeel, is the blackmailer, and he becomes friends with Potter as a means of finding out what he knows. Eventually, Roarty does learn the true identity of the blackmailer (another local man, Roary Rua), but by then the novel has become less focused on the details of the murder case than on the “disintegration of [Roarty’s] body and soul,” as Richard Brown puts it.

Roarty’s murder of Eales is part of an attempt to exert power over his daughter’s sexuality and also, in a more symbolic sense, over all “aberrant” sexuality (including Roarty’s own aberrant tendencies which I will discuss later). Roarty’s murder of Eamonn Eales is motivated by Eales’s violation of the patriarchal power structures that regulate sexuality with homosociality. Eales does not participate in the homosocial circle of Roarty and his patrons, a circle that serves to regulate, at least to a certain extent, the sexual activity of its members. In the first chapter of the novel we are told by the narrator that from Roarty’s point of view,

there was something unnatural about [Eales], not simply because he was a cunning Kerryman in remote Donegal but because he was secretive, sharp-tongued, overconfident and lacked intimate friends; and though he went out with every girl who would look at him, he behaved as if he would not even consider the possibility that one of them could become his wife. (12)

Additionally, Eales’s possession of pornography indicates a sexuality based in pleasure, and not in love, a marital future, or procreation. Even Gimp Gillespie (another member of the pub patrons and the local journalist), com-
menting on Eales’s mysterious disappearance, notes Eales’s rampant sexual appetite: “I’ve never known a man so given over to women. He couldn’t meet a girl on the road without putting the comether on her. They tell me he was even after some of the schoolgirls” (47). When Roarty discovers Eales’s pornography magazine, he reads Eales’s sexuality as aberration: “His head swam with unspeakable possibilities. He looked at the letters page. Troilism. Fellatio. Cunnilingus. It was all there, all the aberration of the civilised world. Eales must be destroyed” (17). Eales comes to symbolize aberration in a larger sense: he embodies “all the aberration of the civilised world.”

Roarty makes another discovery up in Eales’s room; aside from Eales’s interest in aberrant, non-procreative sexual activity, he is also a top—not a homosexual, but a heterosexual man who has conventionally feminine characteristics. He has a womanly concern for his appearance that for Roarty cannot hide his abnormalities, represented symbolically by the pungent smell of his feet:

The window was open but there was a smell in the room, not an unpleasant smell but still a smell, a smell perhaps of used lotions and talcum powders. The room, however, was tidier than his own, the low dressing table covered with an assortment of bottles and hair brushes. What vanity! What misplaced conceit! (16)

Immediately after surveying the dressing table, Roarty searches his mind for the best way to murder Eales. Eales’s foppishness is perhaps a lesser crime compared to his deflowering of Roarty’s daughter Cecily, but such effeminacy nevertheless fits in with Eales’s general evasion of Glenkeel’s masculine norms.

The function of the circle of pub patrons as a means for the regulation of sexuality might best be symbolized by Gimp Gillespie’s introduction of Potter to Nora Hession. Sedgwick discusses how the erotic triangle highlights Gayle Rubin’s theory of the traffic in women, “the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (26). When Gillespie asks Potter if he has had any “good rural rides” lately, he intends to fix Potter up with a local woman, Maggie Hession. This event will ostensibly serve to cement the bonds of friendship between the two men—for one to “give” to the other an agreed-upon sexual (and conversational) partner. On the way to Maggie’s home, Gillespie drunkenly hoists Potter onto his back to make it look as if Potter is in need of Maggie’s medical assistance. The following exchange, joking though it may be, indicates the way in which the homosocial constantly teeters dangerously on the precipice of the homosexual: “‘We’ll be had up for attempted buggery if we’re not careful,’ Potter laughed. ‘But we’ll plead that it was all in the service of heterosexuality!’” (61). Implicit in this joke is the understanding that the male bond is strengthened and even eroticized through the sexual exchange of women. The fact, however, that Potter is ultimately attracted to Nora Hession and not to Maggie, the agreed-upon object of the exchange, greatly complicates the issue. Because Nora is the unwitting object of Gillespie’s own affections,
Potter's relationship with her will ultimately be viewed as a violation of the homosocial bond that Gillespie has sought to create.3 Of course it is Roarty, as the owner of the local pub, who functions as the center of the multiplicity of homosocial bonds within the novel. The reader might be tempted to agree with Potter's consideration that Roarty may be "a latent homosexual who had missed a turning" (235), because Roarty's most revealing relationships seem consistently to be with men. Indeed, Roarty's homosocial desire (it is never blatantly expressed as homosexual) lies at the center of much of Roarty's conflict following the murder; his guilt and suspicion permanently mar his homosocial relationships. The murder at the outset of the novel only serves to complicate, intensify, and, to a certain extent, eroticize Roarty's relationship to the other men in the novel. Suddenly Eales's body becomes the object of desire and Roarty becomes linked to a new and unknown rival, the "Bogmailer." What ensues is a series of shifting rivalries and other power relationships within the homosocial circle of Roarty and his companions.

Roarty longs to have close male companionship, and although the murder itself does not prevent his bonding with his friends, the fact that he is being blackmailed by one of those friends does inhibit his ability to have the close relationships he desires. At the same time, however, Roarty needs to become even closer in some respects to these men, because by closely observing them he hopes to uncover clues that will reveal who the "bogmailer" really is. After having received the first bogmail note, Roarty vows to keep a "weather eye" on Potter, and on the hunting expedition he takes he is surprised by none other than McGing, the local policeman. Potter and McGing become Roarty's two rivals in a somewhat complicated and perhaps asymmetrical triangle; for Roarty the object of desire is the mysterious bogmailer, while for McGing the object is the murderer.

The tie between Roarty and McGing, however, is not nearly as intense as the one between Roarty and Potter, despite the fact that McGing seems to understand and even expresses the concept of the rivalrous relationship, stating that "a policeman feels closer to the criminal than to the most law-abiding citizen. It's the tie between the hunter and the hunted" (73). McGing is not a genuine symmetrical opposite to Roarty because McGing, unlike Potter, is, frankly, not nearly as smart and perceptive as Roarty: "Roarty felt that if they were to wrestle there was no telling which of them would win. But they would not wrestle. Any conflict between them would be one of alien intelligences" (82). Yet the power that McGing wields by virtue of his occupation makes Roarty fear him; regardless of the difference between the two men, Roarty fears the day that McGing will discover the truth about

3. Later, when Roarty anonymously fires a warning shot at Potter and leaves a note which implicates the Canon, McGing asserts Gillespie's guilt, thereby picking up on the violation of the homosocial bond as the most obvious motive.
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Eales's murder. The image of McGing, like that of Potter, recurs incessantly in Roarty's dreams and waking life.

The relationship between Roarty and Potter, however, becomes more complex as they become closer friends and Roarty becomes convinced of Potter's participation in the bogmail. Two weeks after the murder, Roarty decides that Potter is the most likely bogmailer, and he is saddened by what he sees as the inevitable loss of a potential friend:

He could bear for a while the fear and uncertainty that tugged at his peace of mind. What was more difficult to endure was the loneliness of suspicion, the loneliness of a mind that sees all through the wrong end of a telescope. It was a pity that it had to be Potter because Potter was potentially a friend. He was an unknown man, as mysterious in his ways as the wildlife he watched through his fieldglasses, but he must make friends with him, extend a hand across the deep ravine of human loneliness that threatened constantly what creature comforts man could muster. (95)

Roarty is trapped in the duality of his feelings for Potter; he feels terribly lonely because of the suspicions he must now harbor for his friends, but his investigation into the identity of the bogmailer also gives him an excuse to get closer to Potter, especially if he should have to murder him in the end:

He would invite him out for an evening's fishing in his boat, and perhaps as they laughed and talked something of mutual comfort would emerge, a glimpse perhaps of the shared darkness behind the confident smiles. It would be a far-sighted act to make friends with him because, if it ever became necessary to 'delete' him, a friend would be the last to come under suspicion. (95)

Roarty also seems somewhat fascinated with the mysterious Potter, as if, aside from the bogmail issue, Potter might hold some secret key to Roarty's wealth of problems, dysfunctions, and obsessions. Although their friendship holds a practical use for Roarty if he ultimately kills Potter, he seems at times to be more interested in having Potter reveal that "shared darkness" (a complexity and potential brutality of nature that McGing, by contrast, does not appear to possess) that Roarty is so obsessed with in himself.

Roarty's obsession with what he calls "the darkest depths of ourselves" relates back to an intense male friendship that he experienced earlier in his life (137). As a younger man, living and working as a bartender in London, Roarty's most significant relationship was with another man, a young student. The memory of the student is sparked by the second bogmail message which follows the delivery of Eales's foot to McGing, the local police officer. Roarty met the student in London; the two of them would go to movies and sit up till the early morning, drinking and talking, the student telling story after story so that Roarty could only marvel at such a treasure-trove of experience in another human being. He himself had come straight from the seminary but he began to think like the student, sensing the dark ambiguities of a life he had yet to live. (105)

Roarty's fascination with the student centers on these "dark ambiguities"; he compares the student to Potter because he sees something of the student in Potter and also because Roarty would like to have such an intimate friend again.
The student also introduces Roarty to Rimbaud—a homosexual poet—and tells Roarty a story about Rimbaud having "disappeared into the heart of darkest Africa," subsequently paralleling Rimbaud with Conrad's Kurtz and himself with Rimbaud. Roarty later discovers the story about Rimbaud to be untrue, but he remains fascinated with his memory of his relationship with the student. Once the student, like his tale of Rimbaud, had vanished, Roarty "was lonely beyond description. He could hardly believe that one man could pine so keenly for the company of another ..." (106). The student (whose name, Parker, is even similar to Potter), he thinks, "had marked his life though. Since then he had never had a friend. But in many ways Potter reminded him of the student" (106). Roarty, however, does note one big difference between Potter and the student; although the student had been fascinated with the "heart of darkness," Potter is "remote from the brute centre of himself" (106). Roarty, too, desires to embrace his own brute nature, and he appears to criticize Potter's inability to do so. He seems to want Potter to reveal to him that there is a brute centre inside of Potter and that he has more in common with Roarty and Roarty's young student than he appears to.

Potter, too, recognizes a certain kinship with Roarty when they go out fishing together:

Roarty and he had never been together in a boat and, though no word had been uttered, each performed his task as if rehearsed to perfection. His happiness came from the knowledge that he was a practical man in the company of one of his peers, someone who could be trusted implicitly to do the right thing in a tight spot. (117)

Potter is then reminded of his wife, and he feels reaffirmed in the benefits of male companionship:

And it came to him that a man who lived without the company and conversation of a woman missed half the pleasure of life, but that a man who did not enjoy male camaraderie and manly pursuits missed the other half. (117)

In light of the sexual politics of the novel as a whole, this statement seems to be an understatement; as I will discuss further on, the company and conversation of women does not truly seem to be represented as even "half the pleasure of life."

But Potter, it must be noted, is more often than not mistaken about the actions and motives of the men on the island; and the reader has to smile about whether Roarty can truly be trusted to do the right thing in a tight spot. Additionally, at several points in the novel, Potter wrongly predicts how his relationship with Nora will work out. After he has been shot at (by Roarty, although Potter does not know the identity of the shooter), he admits that "he had romanticised Glenkeel and its inhabitants out of all reality" (223). Potter attributes a rustic simplicity to all of the men; in his perception of Roarty,

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4. In fact, Potter does admit that being in Glenkeel has nurtured some element of his psyche that lies deep within himself; but while Roarty perceives this element to be a primitive brutality, Potter perceives it as a sense of "spiritual peace." "Never before had he been so close to the true centre of himself, so aware of half-thoughts and intimations and the vague nudgings of the unconscious" (109).
this rustic simplicity takes the form of quiet consideration. Potter has difficulty understanding Roarty’s more violent and impulsive nature. On their fishing trip he is “perplexed to discover a side of Roarty which he had not previously observed. He had not regarded him as a man of lightning impulse; he had seen him as unhurried and considered in thought and movement” (124). The reader, of course, having witnessed the murder, understands Roarty’s impulsive, passionate side and knows just how wrong Potter has been.

In addition to misreading Roarty, Potter projects a sexual innocence onto the men of Glenkeel. When he and Gillespie see Cor Mogaill staring up the tailpipe of his car, he turns the incident into a homosexual joke about the difference between England and Ireland:

‘Now, in England that would never happen. I know several suburban men whose lives are their cars. They dream about them, talk about them, copulate in them, and when they drive into the country on Sundays they sit in them eating sandwiches. Yet not one of them would be seen dead looking up the exhaust of another man’s car.’

‘You English are so sophisticated.’

‘Or sexually self-aware. Compared with us Cor Mogaill is an innocent.’

(48)

Potter perceives a sexual innocence in the Glenkeel men, and also wrongly believes that he will awaken what he thinks is Nora Hession’s latent sexuality. He feels that perhaps Nora worked as the Canon’s housekeeper because “he would never make a demand she could not meet. Now she was faced with a different beast, a man who would hold a mirror to her face and perhaps surprise her into self-discovery” (92). He is wrong, of course, and when he promises her “only the warmth of the sun,” she responds ominously, “The sun is never warm here. Even on the finest day there’s a breeze from the sea” (93). In the end, Nora presents herself as utterly self-sufficient, refusing to marry Potter or abort their unborn child; it is then that Potter, confused about the “tangled, torn state of his feelings,” blames Nora for his frustration and confusion and drives “straight to Roarty’s, desperate for the harmless deceptions of male companionship” (244).5

Of course, during the fishing trip Roarty becomes convinced that Potter is the bogmailer and he begins to plan a way to kill him, despite his affection for Potter and his reservations about reducing the number of “intelligent and entertaining conversationalist[s]” in Glenkeel (132). Thus, ironically, the “deceptions of male companionship” are likely to be extremely harmful to Potter. But, for both of the men, the issue of male companionship becomes more complex at this point. During the fishing trip, Potter suggests that the men (the pub regulars) band together as a committee to keep the Canon from

5. Whether the deceptions of male companionship really are harmful may not even matter in a rigidly patriarchal society that values male homosocial desire according to Sedgwick. In her discussion of Shakespeare’s sonnets she points out that “... for a man to undergo even a humiliating change in the course of a relationship with a man still feels like preserving or participating in a sum of male power, while for a man to undergo any change in the course of a relationship with a woman feels like a radical degeneration of substance” (45).
removing the old wooden altar from the new church and putting in its place a modern limestone table altar. Considering the issue later on, Roarty welcomes the chance not only to take his mind off the murder, McGing’s investigation, and the bogmail, but also to soothe his intense feelings of loneliness:

He recognised immediately that involvement in the impersonal was what he needed to take his mind off McGing. If he became immersed in committee work, he would have less time to brood over his dreadful secret. He would be engaged with other men in a common pursuit which would knit his life to theirs and alleviate the isolation he had come increasingly to feel. (133)

Although such a relationship is different from the male-male relationships of the Girardian triangle in that it is not a rivalrous relationship, the structure is the same—men who are brought closer to other men in the pursuit of a common goal.

But despite what he optimistically views as positive and cooperative male bonding involved in the Anti-Limestone Society meetings, Roarty cannot shake the haunting feeling of a dangerous connection that he now has with Potter and McGing:

His thoughts hung on the trinity of Eales, Potter and McGing, and he could not help feeling that they were one and the same person, the creation of his own insatiable demon. Day after day these three persons tortured him with their ubiquity until he longed to cleanse his mind of all trace of them. (150)

Here Roarty acknowledges his personal perversion of the Catholic religious hierarchy and he correctly perceives the link between himself and these three men as one of his own making. Eales, Potter and McGing are ever-present in his mind to the point that he feels they are one, and something that he created. As the novel continues, Roarty’s connections to both Potter and McGing intensify; he feels “as if every wisp of thought were known to McGing” and also perceives himself to be “pinioned by thoughts of Potter and McGing to the point where his health had begun to suffer and he had begun to fear for his sanity” (163). He is at the mercy of his reactions to these two men, both obsessed with and afraid of their potential power over him:

He could not hear a sentence from Potter without repeating it to himself like an actor, changing the inflexions and recasting it to see if by some linguistic alchemy it might expose the Englishman’s dread secret. And he could no longer pass the time of day with McGing without sensing the brute single-mindedness of the hunter who is half in love with his quarry. (174)

Roarty’s connection to these two men has become so intense that he involuntarily attempts to become them when he is with them. He is losing his sense of self because of his over-identification with his rivals.

It becomes clear to the reader that Roarty has very real reasons to fear for his sanity. The murder set off for Roarty not only a series of intensified homosocial and rivalrous relationships, but also a rather destructive process of self-examination. Eales, we could argue, is definitely Roarty’s creation in that Eales came to embody for Roarty his own “heart of darkness” or “brute centre of himself” (106). Roarty psychologically projected onto Eales all of his own potential deviant sexuality in order to rationalize killing him. The
“evil” of Eales represents much more than just his sadistic tendencies and his sexual activity with Cecily. His murder represents Roarty’s desire to repress—bury—his own sexual past and control his future, for which he predicts eventual madness.

Throughout his life Roarty has been haunted by the memory of his mad uncle Lanty Duggan. Duggan was put in an asylum for “bouncing a nine-year old girl on the shaft of his erect penis,” and he died in a straitjacket in the asylum. Roarty has “a vision of a smelly old man in the back of an ambulance … and suddenly he feared for himself. It seemed to him that far from being short life was longer than he cared to contemplate” (174). Roarty fears that, given a long enough life, he too will go the way of Lanty Duggan. When Roarty was in the seminary, he found himself attracted to little girls making their first communions, and he left the seminary to indulge some of his sexual desire, in hopes that such pedophiliac tendencies would disappear.

He remembered how on holiday he had watched young girls in white first communion dresses returning from the altar rails and how in his heart he had desired them. He did not get up from his pew as Lanty Duggan might have done because he had not yet strayed sufficiently from reality. But what if he should in years to come? Lanty Duggan lived within him, an evil-smelling old man, a corrupter of innocence. He left the seminary to escape from that old Adam whom he knew would haunt him unrelentingly in a life of celibacy. Now in his middle age the battle had begun to go in the old man’s favour. As it happened, he was impotent but his impotence made his desires all the more fantastical. Already he could sense them driving him off the highroad into hedges and ditches like a wild tramp of the hills. Lanty Duggan still lived. He was a maggot within his brain that threatened to consume his reason. (248-49)

This passage tells us a great deal about Roarty’s particular neurosis and how it is influenced by societal regulation of sexuality. Roarty feels himself turning into Lanty, whom he labels as “a corrupter of innocence” and considers in the same way as he considers Eales. Roarty’s impotence, far from solving the problem, exacerbates it and renders his sexual desires “all the more fantastical” because they can never be fulfilled. But most importantly, Roarty has a sense of a vague “them,” the people who make up society—a society that carefully regulates sexuality by labeling certain kinds of sexuality as deviant and by attempting to expel that deviance altogether. In a Foucaultian sense, such a strategy of repression only serves to demonstrate the society’s fascination with sexuality and even reproduces it—Lanty’s perversion does not haunt Roarty so much as the societal disgust, the punishment of the madhouse, and the death in the straitjacket.

Indeed, the men in the novel seem to be driven to male companionship because of their inability to have successful relationships with women in a very conventional sense. The novel does not depict female homosocial relationships nor does it depict any male-female purely social relationships. Every relationship is either a male homosocial one or a sexual one. And because the world of the novel is a highly patriarchal one that values the male
homosocial relationship more than the male-female heterosexual relationship, the female characters generally do not fare well in *Bogmail*.

The female characters, as I have mentioned earlier, are typically objectified; they are presented as illusions of perfect innocence and beauty, threatening embodiments of an intimidating sexual desire and/or objects that serve to bond men together. Girard writes that “triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object” and the rivalrous relationship “confers [upon the object] an illusory value” (17). We see this process occur with several of the women in the text; as a result of their position at the apex of triangular desire, they come to embody a set of romanticized ideals in the minds of the desiring men. When the women elude these idealizations, as all of them in some way do, the men deal with their disillusionment by acknowledging female sexuality and desire as something cruel and debauched, quite unlike their objectifying fantasies.

Early on in the text, Potter relates an experience he had on the commuter train from London to Kent. An eighteen-year-old girl got on the train and startled the “seven bored, slightly complacent men” out of their boredom and complacency. Potter is keenly aware of the way in which the presence of the girl unites the men in a rivalrous relationship, particularly in terms of class difference. Potter says that he “could not but marvel at the way she had transfigured the drab compartment, not to mention the thoughts of the seven of us who until then had not a worthwhile purpose in common” (52). Potter measures the class difference of his fellow train riders by which stop they get off at; the lower classes live closest to the city and thus get off earlier. Potter himself has a long ride out to his wealthy suburb, and he hopes that he will have the girl “all to [him]self” if she is middle-class enough to stay on the train to Chelsfield, but she gets off at the first stop after London Bridge. In other words, Potter’s class superiority over the other men could potentially have allowed him to realize an actual relationship; the girl, however, is so far beneath the social classes of all of the men in the compartment that they and Potter are left with only each other and an unrealized fantasy.

Potter tells his audience that “if she had once opened her mouth, she might have shattered the illusion as many women do. But of this I am sure. She would have never said in any circumstances: ‘That was a clitoral’” (52). The fact that the girl does not say anything and her class ambiguity (at least until her departure) are what most fascinate the men. She is attractive, but she is also mysterious. Potter believes that the girl “would just qualify for the middle-class belt” but she does not; this reality, however, does not shatter the men’s illusions but rather helps to maintain them. He states that his error in judging her class “enhanced [his] pleasure in her beauty” (53). The men bond in the process of projecting onto her what they most desire in a woman, a beauty and simplicity that Potter in particular feels to be present only in the lower classes. Relating the incident causes Potter to experience intensely his own loneliness; “what the girl represented for him was lost for ever” (53). What seems lost forever for Potter is the innocence and simplicity of lower-
class life as Potter believes it to be; the attraction, like his attraction for Nora Hession, is based on a predictable and romantic stereotype.

Additionally, for the girl on the train to be idealized by Potter, he has to subtract from her any sexual agency or aggression. The original author of the statement "[that was a clitoral]" is a woman Potter had a brief sexual affair with in London, Diana Duryea. After having a pleasant sexual encounter with the childlike and wholly unthreatening Nora Hession, Potter "closed his eyes and shivered in the shadow of Diana Duryea" (215). He remembers how Diana, after having announced how her orgasm was "a clitoral as opposed to a vaginal orgasm," told Potter that he was mildly boring and that what she liked about him was "not so much [his] wit as his small ass" (217). Diana’s sexual appetite and her frank announcement repulse Potter; he was confronted with a woman who had turned the tables and objectified him. “The most memorable hurts were always administered by women,” Potter thinks to himself in the narrative present. “If only men were masochists, what a feast life would be” (218).

Cecily, Roarty’s daughter, plays a rather complex role for a character who never appears in the novel; she, like Eales, is an object of Roarty’s projected sexual dysfunctions. Cecily is a product not of Roarty’s sexual potency but of his impotency. She is not Roarty’s biological daughter; in fact, she was conceived when Roarty’s wife began having sex with other men to compensate for Roarty’s mysterious sexual impotence. Roarty’s disempowerment in the face of his wife’s sexual needs complicates his relationship with Cecily, particularly because his wife died giving birth to her. He desires to shape Cecily into his idea of a perfect woman, a superior replacement for his wife: innocent, virtually asexual, and dependent on Roarty himself. Although the relationship is not a sexual one, Cecily takes the place of both daughter and wife: “She was not only his daughter, but his little woman too” (149). Unlike his wife, who, Roarty feels, “had defeated him” in both her life and her death, Cecily is almost completely under Roarty’s direction: “She was not his flesh, but she was the apple of his eye. And because she was not his flesh he was driven to mould her to an extent which no ordinary father would attempt” (149). Roarty attempts to cultivate the “innocent intelligence” that he perceives in the girl, and “to provide the tilth of experience in which her young personality could grow” (149). The agricultural metaphor emerges clearly; despite Roarty’s impotence and hence infertility, he wants to provide his own fertile ground for Cecily’s development.

And yet the “tilth” that Roarty has provided is sterile in the sense that it is entirely removed from sexuality.7 In contrast, Roarty perceives Eales to have “transplanted [Cecily] to a putrefactive tilth, the midden of life where nothing grows but black-gilled toadstools” (149). The “midden” —the dung heap—is

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7. When Nora reveals her pregnancy to Potter, he is pleased because when he and his wife tried to have children he had been told by a doctor that his sperm count was low. Potter thinks that “obviously what his seed had needed all those years was a sufficiently fertile tilth” (240). Again the agricultural terms are used to consider degrees of human sterility and fertility.
viewed by Roarty as repulsive, but in keeping with the agricultural metaphor, dung acts as fertilizer for new growth. In Roarty’s mind Eales has defiled Cecily and initiated her into the world of female sexual desire—desire that haunted Roarty’s marriage once he became impotent and which still haunts him in the novel’s narrative present.

And he thought of Cecily playing Papillons with a lightness that had promised invincible innocence, now a grown woman writing in desperation to a debauched bugger from Kerry, her purity of heart overcome by the primacy of the clitoris. And finally he thought of the woman who had brought her into the world, and he could hardly marvel at the transformation that had overtaken her daughter. Her mother was a prize bitch, and no doubt Cecily had gone through the first toll gate on the highroad to a monstrous middle age. (142)

Roarty’s anger at Eales for debauching Cecily appears to mask Roarty’s own latent physical attraction to Cecily. According to Girard’s theory, “only someone who prevents us from satisfying a desire which he himself has inspired in us is truly an object of hatred. The person who hates first hates himself for the secret admiration concealed by his hatred” (11). Roarty’s aggression toward Eales suggests that Eales has succeeded in a sexual conquest of which Roarty, on some level, is envious; yet because of Roarty’s own fears of a near-incestuous and pedophilic sexuality, he is forced to hate Eales and deny Cecily’s own sexual nature. His impotence also exacerbates Roarty’s anger and repression; he is unable to see female sexual desire as anything but monstrous. The connections Roarty has drawn between himself, Eales, and Lanty Duggan all work to demonstrate how Roarty himself could eventually play the role of the “debauched bugger.”

It should come as no surprise, then, given the experiences and attitudes that the male characters have about heterosexual sex, that the novel climaxes (pun intended) with two men wrestling one another; nearly simultaneously, there occurs both a metaphoric ejaculation—a gun being fired—and an actual physical ejaculation. Roarty, after deciding that he is quickly slipping towards the Lanty Duggan aspect of his personality, takes his rifle up to Rory Rua’s house. Rua also has a rivalrous relationship with Roarty as his economic rival for Crubog’s land. Roarty has learned that Crubog, despite his desire to sell to a farmer with a wife and children (normative and procreative sexuality rewarded by land and potential income), has agreed to sell his land to Rory Rua and not to Roarty. Roarty hopes that “the fizz of a bullet at [Rory’s] ear as he slept would make him think twice before completing the deal” (250). But when he approaches the house, he is grabbed from behind by “two powerful arms” (251). As they struggle, the rifle goes off in Roarty’s hands:

The other man sank to his knees with a groan, clutching the legs of Roarty’s trousers. Roarty freed himself with a kick and was about to hurry off when a single word stopped him. ‘Bogmail.’ He recognised the gruff voice of Rory Rua and sensed somehow that the word might be his last. He bent over the dark heap and ejaculated with throbbing fear into his trousers. (251)

Roarty’s unexpected ejaculation parallels the release of the homosocial tension that has been pent up throughout the novel. The act of ejaculation seems to imply that, in accordance with Sedgwick’s theories, the homosocial is
implicitly linked with the homosexual. The sexual event, the ejaculation, occurs just as the main rivalries (between Roarty and Potter, and Roarty and the Bogmailer) are resolved. Roarty finally knows who the Bogmailer is, and that Potter, his prime suspect, is innocent. The mystery that drew Roarty and Potter together as rivals has been solved; and as Potter leaves for London, Roarty is "genuinely sorry to see him go" (259). This release appears to be the major concern of the novel’s ending; what actually happens to Roarty as a result of all this murder and mayhem remains a mystery.

Roarty’s discovery and murder of Rory Rua also seems to finalize Roarty’s transformation into a new version of Lanty Duggan; afterwards, he feels that “he had unwittingly become a stranger to himself, that the man he prized most, the reclusive would-be scholar who memorised Britannica and listened to Schumann in the small hours, had been devoured by his opposite” (255). Although Roarty does not end the novel as a raving lunatic, he does imply that his murdering days might not be over; his original object of desire, Cecily, will be returning home with a new rival for Roarty. Roarty ponders whether he will have to “expunge” Cecily’s new boyfriend: “Life, he smiled to himself, was so full of ironic possibility” (255). This open-ended conclusion demonstrates the playfulness with which McGinley has dealt with these issues throughout the text. Despite McGinley’s unwillingness to give the reader a clear sense of closure, throughout the novel he has explored, with humor and psychological depth, the “ironic possibilities” of the patterns of male homosocial desire and the conflict of such desire with heterosexual norms.

Works Cited


