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MOLLY KEANE'S BLACK COMEDY: A CRITIQUE OF A CLASS

There seems to be little doubt about the continuing existence of different classes in contemporary society, despite occasional denials. Both views, however, and particularly their contrasting assumptions, result from the fact that for a long time class has been and remains a controversial concept in sociology. The term and the concept have gone through developments in terms of definitions and redefinitions, they have been politicised and their outlines blurred, often not only at the edges. Sometimes they have been consigned to history. But we do not learn about class from sociological texts or official economic statistics only. What can be, and usually is, taken into account, in at least some schemes of the structure, is the popular awareness of the existing class stratification as acquired in everyday life and, not negligibly, as aided by the media, film and literature. The resulting picture appears to be rather more complex and adds to the overall ambiguity of the issue.

One such example can be found in the terminology and demarcation of the top strata of sociological categories where terms like 'the upper class' have been seen as controversial and disappeared from some recent social class schemes, together with the gentry and aristocracy as special groupings. Yet the gentry are a case in point here in more than one respect. Not only can they hardly be regarded as a class to themselves when even in their heyday the boundary dividing them from the aristocracy on the one hand and the bourgeois class on the other was never clearly defined, but owing to the greatly changed economic and political layout of the countryside, particularly since the last war, there appears to be less justification for their separate classification than ever before. In spite of that the notion of the gentry as a class has survived in the general consciousness, although in part perhaps mainly thanks to the fact that they, and particularly their lifestyle, have always provided a popular setting for film and literature.

The setting is largely epitomised by an ancestral home which has come to be projected into a kind of cult of the country house, the popularity of the theme being enhanced, apart from fiction, by the tourist industry, pictorial publications as well as academic studies. With the political and economic importance and social influence of the gentry gradually diminished and many of the houses falling on hard times, the cult has shifted towards popular mythology.

European cultures and literatures generally abound with the cult of the ancestral home and within the context of Ireland the Big House novel may well be considered to be a genre in its own right in that it stands, more than anywhere else, at the focal point of several conflicting forces, which lends itself to a greater variability of the theme. In addition to its long tradition in Anglo-Irish literature of the past, recent decades have supplied an abundant flow of Big House novels with Irish settings which, at first sight, might seem to fit in with the nostalgic trends of the eighties, but on closer inspection usually reveal not only the symbolic potential of the Anglo-Irish big house for the historical and political past of the country, but also for many of the so far unresolved and still painful divisions of today.

While most of the Big House novels of the past map out the Irish political and cultural climate of their time to at least some extent, whether we think of Maria Edgeworth in the early nineteenth century or Elizabeth Bowen much more recently, the contemporary additions to the tradition are centred around the symbolism of the house, the memory and effects of its divisive past and the crumbling present, marking the end of an era and a class. In her novels of the nineteen eighties, *Good Behaviour* (1981), *Time After Time* (1983) and *Loving and Giving* (1988), Molly Keane negotiates the distance between the past and the present by means of black comedy, which makes the novels both enjoyable records of changing lifestyles and attitudes as well as studies of human nature. At the same time her perspective saves her novels from nostalgic or celebratory moods and turns them into critical studies of manners and social ritual. As the strict code of behaviour targeted by her criticism appears to be central to the making of the class in question – the gentry – her comedy may be viewed as criticism of that class although she dispenses with political bias or class politics altogether.

The value of the novel as one of the many sources of study of the multifaceted nature of any society has long been recognised. A great deal of sociological and historical data on class finds parallels in the pages of fiction, enriching the student of a particular culture and period with another dimension afforded by the novelists' different angle of vision. Arthur Marwick, for example, studies class and class relationships in their historical and present context through academic and polemical images, official images, private and popular images as well as fictional and media images, that is to say, as 'class, class structure and class attitudes are perceived from within the societies studied.'¹ The early theo-

1 Arthur Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality*. London: Macmillan 1980, second edition 1990, p. 12.

reticians of class used the gentry as a model of the propertied class at a time when the gentry wielded considerable political power backed by equally considerable wealth. Although sociologists now usually agree that income or wealth differences do not amount to class differences and, conversely, that equal income or wealth does not constitute a class, the discrepancy between the overall situation of the gentry some hundred years ago and today is considerable. It might be argued that at best we should now be speaking of a status group in Weber's sense 'in which people share a similar culture'² rather than a class. Nevertheless, it is equally true to argue that in the most varied sources from history books to fiction, the gentry appear to be a class to themselves in Marwick's broad sense of class awareness both from within and without. His concept of class and his terminology, which reflect his comprehensive and open approach to class issues, seem to me best suited to my purpose of examining class through works of fiction and viewing the gentry in Molly Keane's novels as a class.

Classes evolve and they are also subject to sudden events, particularly events of a political character. But just as every kind of social ritual takes time to catch up with social change, the rituals which to an important extent constitute the way of life of a class may sustain the class or help it to adapt to changed conditions. Class perceptions in a given society play an essential role in the process. In Marwick's argument it is necessary to integrate the data on the material circumstances and relation to power with the perceptions and images of the particular class which people themselves have. Here we are in the area of status awareness, which need not correlate with the economic boundary and where, on the other hand, criteria such as behaviour as part of a lifestyle play a crucial role. This has been confirmed in a recent study of the gentry in Northern Ireland by Amanda Shanks, who finds it impossible to define the gentry in terms of property, in this case the land and money owned, because 'for the individuals themselves, it is not objective criteria which determine who is and who is not to be called gentry, but the way in which people behave ... the gentry perceive status in terms of a code of behaviour.'³

The general similarities in the rise and decline of the English and Anglo-Irish gentry, their lifestyle at the time of their glory and since, have been affected by the different political situation and events in Ireland especially since the 1920s. While the English gentry in the twenties and thirties were still wielding substantial power and influence in the British Government and Parliament, their Anglo-Irish counterparts in independent Ireland found themselves in complete political isolation. These developments had been preceded by the precipitous events in the Irish struggle for independence and the Republican and pro-Treaty battles, when between 1921 and 1923, 192 Big Houses were burned down and many of the Anglo-Irish left the country, particularly the south of Ireland, after Partition. Although allowed to stay in the country and hold on to their property,

2 Amanda Shanks, *Rural Aristocracy in Northern Ireland*. Avebury: Gower 1988, p. 168.

3 *Ibid.* p. 167.

the Anglo-Irish gentry experienced a sudden collapse of regard for their values. The gradual decay of the landed class, which was a generalised social phenomenon elsewhere as the century progressed, was accelerated in Ireland by those events of radical historical change.

Ironically, the very isolation of the gentry, whether created suddenly or gradually by outside circumstances, and abetted by their exclusivism from inside, appears to have helped to preserve the class. Shared values, including the norms and rules of behaviour, remain an important cohesive factor. Shanks quotes Streib (1973), who notes that in the Republic of Ireland,

the cultural residue of the old ascendancy, including the retention of British titles ... together with accent, items of dress and leisure activities ... are the very thing which members of the Irish gentry are constantly using to recreate the cultural pattern of life which is characteristic of their social category. (p. 144)

Shank's own analysis also confirms that the gentry in Northern Ireland 'show few signs of abandoning their traditional culture and attempting to merge with the rest of Northern Irish society.' (p. 158) We may be dealing with the decline of a class, but not its death.

In recent approaches to literary criticism, the links between fiction, history, social class, biography, and gender have come increasingly under scrutiny. In their study of attitudes to class in the English novel, Eagleton and Pierce come to the conclusion, sanctioned by David Daiches, that 'however much novelists themselves might wish to avoid class in their work, ... the interpretation of fiction and social class is deep, wide-ranging and inevitable'.⁴ Eagleton and Pierce credit the novelist with becoming involved in vehement criticism of the most destructive elements of the material world even though he or she is only 'led through human responsiveness, not political commitment, to attack concepts and institutions' and show 'how individuals despite effort are inexorably trapped and worn down'.⁵

The lifestyle and the fortunes of the Anglo-Irish gentry are the theme and the setting of the three 1980s novels of Molly Keane as well as of her earlier novels written from the twenties to the fifties under the pseudonym M. J. Farrell. In this sense they can be classified as novels of class. Although they at the same time also fall into the category of the Anglo-Irish Big House novel, they stand somewhat apart from the tradition, because they lack the broad context given to the genre by most other writers. Unlike the much younger novelists and contemporaries of her 1980s novels, such as Jennifer Johnston or William Trevor, for whom the events of the twenties are history to be studied, Keane, an eyewitness to them, makes no allusion to the political background of her largely

4 Mary Eagleton and D. Pierce, *Attitudes to Class in the English Novel*. London: Thames and Hudson 1979, p. 9.

5 *Ibid.* pp. 12-13

retrospective novels other than portraying the gradual decline of the Big House and its inhabitants. Likewise, her fictional world is untouched by the polemics for and against the possibilities of a fusion of Anglo-Irish and Gaelic cultures. For her characters they might never have taken place, all this despite the romantic Celticism of Keane's own mother, who was known as the Poet of the Seven Glens. Although Keane's parental home was burned down in the struggle of the early twenties, she eschews including this part of her personal experience in her novels, unlike Elizabeth Bowen (*The Last September*, 1929), Edith Somerville (*The Big House of Inver*, 1925) and other writers. But again unlike most of the novels employing the motif of the great house outside the Irish context, which tend towards romantic fiction or nostalgic idealisation of lost values, the kind of Yeatsian end-of-culture mode, Keane's writing is a vigorous comedy of manners and in that a critical novel of class. Out of the many aspects which the multifaceted nature of the context offers, Molly Keane's 1980s novels trace how the stringent upper-class code of behaviour sustains the class and upholds the class divisions while it restricts and often thwarts the individual, condemning him or her to a lack of freedom of decision and emotional deprivation. Keane's representation of the effects of the upper-class manners and ritual may be read as her merciless criticism of the class. Her treatment of the theme may also be understood as symbolic of the decay of the class. Arthur Marwick points out that 'in literature, the country house has long symbolised the qualities and values of community.' (p. 4) Keane effectively subverts many of them by exposing a group of their exponents to ridicule and showing their behaviour as a product of snobbery. Keane obviously does not subscribe to the ideal or mythologisation of the Big House; rather, she can see her own past social experience with a new insight through a dramatic conversation with it. Here she appears to have a great deal in common with such contemporary British writers as Penelope Lively or Graham Swift, who repeatedly return to the motif of how one cannot escape one's own past. Keane's novels are about the restrictive limitations of the class she portrays and the inability of her protagonists to transcend them.

Keane certainly does not criticise the Anglo-Irish gentry, the class she herself comes from, in the accustomed oppositional political, ideological sense or in the Irish nationalist sense, but entirely from the point of view of an individual trapped and mutilated by the assumptions of his or her class, eventually moulded by them in the class-defined image. In spite of that, Keane is mostly only credited with writing black comedy and not what, in my opinion, adds up to a sustained and systematic criticism of the whole process of socialisation into the class, whose aim is to make its members conform to the established pattern and become the true products of the class. With the deep and compassionate insight of her comic vision Keane observes how this comes about and what consequences the class definition imposed from outside imprints on individual private lives and the individual's psyche.

Socialisation into a class begins at an early age and in the upper classes it is connected with the institution of the nursery. Keane's picture of the nursery and

schoolroom is bleak and the distance and difference from the adult world of the drawing-room and the dining-room abysmal. This is where the children lead more isolated than cocooned lives and where emotions and love are not encouraged. In Keane's novels the nursery is the place where the emotional mutilation which defines the lives of her character has its beginning. Although Jessica Gerard tells us that the notorious austerity of the nineteenth-century country house nursery and schoolroom, of plain food, unheated bedrooms and cold baths, was over by the Edwardian period,⁶ Keane's fictional characters do not cherish happy memories of their nursery days. Aroon in *Good Behaviour* remembers the appalling food in the nursery of her childhood, with porridge, crusted milk, rabbit stews and custard puddings being the daily staples, the smell of paraffin from the meagre fire and her baby brother neglected by a succession of nurses, and her mother, who did not want to know about the nursery: 'She had had us and she longed to forget the horror of it once and for all.'⁷ She did not even attend to Baby Hubert when he suddenly fell ill. But it did not occur to Aroon to complain about any of that. She already knew then how to behave.

Another case in point where the class definition in relation to young children is superimposed over any other consideration is the children's riding practice. In Keane's *Big House* world, the child's life is subordinated to it regardless of his or her fear or health or the dangers of the sport. In *Good Behaviour*, the children hate their ponies because the demands of the training that will guarantee them the approval of and full membership in their class are rigorous. Here again class is the decisive factor which not only takes precedence over the child's possible leanings and preferences but also plays an important role in the parent-child relationship. The parental inadequacy and simultaneous dominance in their children's lives is reflected by Keane as a class phenomenon.

Maurice Halbwachs notes that in every social category or group there have to be 'certain individuals who concentrate [the] beliefs and opinions [of the group] within themselves, and who hold them so strongly that they radiate out amongst the whole group.'⁸ Keane's mother figures play this role to perfection, notwithstanding the dismal outcome. To start with, they are all beautiful and elegant and adored by their offspring. Aroon in *Good Behaviour* and Nicandra in *Loving and Giving* bask in their mothers' meagre attention whenever bestowed upon them despite the tyranny of manners that makes Aroon dumb in Mummie's company and Nicandra throw up the food which Maman insists on her finishing. The alienation which comes gradually to Aroon with the realisation of her mother's coldness and inattention emphasised by the social stiffness and pretention, affects her relations to other people for the rest of her life. Keane anatomises and satirises the distance imposed on the parent-child relationships

6 Jessica Gerard, *Country House Life*. Oxford: Blackwell 1994, p. 46.

7 Molly Keane, *Good Behaviour*. London: Andre Deutsch 1981, p. 13.

8 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Psychology of Social Class*. London: Heineman 1956, p. 17.

by the rigorous code of manners of the class, which the children are bound to internalise in order to please.

More open and direct class criticism may be discerned in the comments in Keane's novels on school education. The usual pattern as described in sociological studies is on the whole followed: the boys are sent off to notable English public schools while the girls' education is paid considerably less attention to, with the actual schools they attend hardly mentioned. But in spite of that, the social code requires that they be sent away to a boarding school. Keane clearly resents the male and class privilege that the boys enjoy:

Mrs. Brock's task was to prepare them for their preparatory school. This was not difficult, as Entwhistle's was only too ready to accept the right sort of boy; if his father and uncles were Old Boys he could be the right sort of moron and welcome. (*Good Behaviour*, p.19)

Nevertheless, education, whether superior or inferior, seems to be of little consequence to the hunting and racing society of Keane's novels. It is only the name of the right school that is necessary to appease the snobbish conscience of these people whose world is utterly devoid of books and learning. Their inescapable class affiliation does not even allow them to read books, because 'there was a right and wrong ritual of doing anything.' (*Good Behaviour*, 29) As is known from Keane's biography, the pseudonym M. J. Farrell under which she wrote her early novels was necessary to protect her from being ridiculed and rejected in her social circles, where horses and riding were all that counted.

Keane's psychological insight into the effects of upbringing on the adult psyche retains perceptible class overtones. The everyday ritual of the class culture comes to be internalised and makes the members of the class what they are. The terrible stiff-upper-lipness resulting from and, in turn, leading to deep emotional insecurity in a vicious circle of disregard for each other's feelings, stands out as one important characteristic feature of the class and is much under Keane's sharp scrutiny. When Aroon's young brother Hubert is killed in a car accident, the family are devastated, but, as Aroon remembers, 'our good behaviour went on and on, endless as the days. No one spoke of the pain we were sharing. Our discretion was almost complete.' (*Good Behaviour*, p. 114) It is this kind of code of conduct, Keane sets out to show us, that characterises the class which spurns the natural kindness and longing for human contact and emotions in the child that Aroon was and turns her into the bitter, spiteful witch she becomes. The enforced suppression of emotions goes hand in hand with dread of sympathy and closeness and therefore what the four siblings living under one roof in Keane's *Time After Time* desire most is distance, privacy and secrecy. They have been instilled with a contempt for the weakness of sympathy and emotions and their well concealed private feelings give them the power they desire. The locked doors of their bedrooms make them the true products of their world – a secretive world of hidden objects (like the omnipresent but always well secreted 'po'), unmentionable words and secret affairs dealt with ruthlessly but word-

lessly. It is only now, in their old age, that they learn from their resentful, outlandish Cousin Leda how she had been sent home by their mother, without a word being said about her suspected flirt with their father. Keane juxtaposes the physical handicaps and infirmities of the elderly protagonists of this novel with their emotional mutilation, and although she treats their weaknesses, disloyalties and even darker secrets (like May's shoplifted collection of china rabbits) with humour and compassion, her critical angle of vision loses nothing of its sharp edge. She shows to what extent it is due to their class situation that Jasper Swift and his three sisters live out of touch with the contemporary world, in deliberate seclusion and very much in the past, still dressing up for dinner though concocted by Jasper himself in a filthy kitchen now devoid of servants. Along with the pathetic observances of the relics of the daily ritual of their class, they are still sensitive to the hierarchy within the upper class. Keane probes the class sensibilities and how they govern the lives of her characters and make them vulnerable. May can easily be humiliated by her friend Alys, who ranks higher on the hierarchical class ladder and who refers to May's Flower Club middle-class Irish ladies as 'milk-in-firsts'. But unlike May, they, living in a different world, are 'unimpressed by the tat and peeling paint' of Alys's Big House.⁹ The lack of autonomy that the class background imposes on the four ageing inhabitants of Durraghglass makes them ill-adjusted to change – a double change in their case: the impoverished circumstances of their estate and life in modern Ireland in the nineteen eighties. The Big House, inasmuch it is a home, has also become a status cage.

This proves to be literally the case for Aroon (*Good Behaviour*) when Temple Alice is already crumbling and she is pining for love and marriage, but refuses her only suitor because he, being a solicitor, is 'not quite her class', of which she is very strongly conscious. Jessica Gerard finds out from upper-class female autobiographers that they were rarely rebels, critical of their girlhood, but rather 'typically complacent, uncritical of their own privileged position and convinced of their natural superiority, they wrote approvingly of their upbringing and pursuits.'¹⁰ Shanks agrees that female members of the gentry have been 'encultured with a sense first of duty towards their husbands and families.'¹¹ Outwardly, Keane's heroines seem to comply with this pattern: they do not rebel or contemplate change or escape. Yet Keane is at pains to show us the faultlines in their complacency. The hungry longing for love and recognition which Nicandra, Aroon and May battle with within the narrow confines of 'good behaviour' is also an outcome and accusation of the emotional constraints imposed on them by their class code of manners. But by voicing the accusation, Keane does not allow her heroines to appear to be victims. On the contrary, she gives them full responsibility for their lives and characters and does not even attempt to create them likeable. What is more, we leave them at the end of the novels at a point

9 Molly Keane, *Time After Time*. London: Andre Deutsch 1984, p. 76.

10 Jessica Gerard, p. 13.

11 Amanda Shanks, p.164.

when any sympathy for them that there might be is at a decidedly low ebb and when they, too, may serve as a tool for criticism of their class.

Yet Keane's criticism is not always recognised by those who comment on her work. Mary Holland, reviewing *Good Behaviour* for the *New Statesman*, does not fail to appreciate the difference in Keane's recent approach to writing from her early M. J. Farrell novels after the gap of thirty years. She points out that Keane's novel is mainly about 'the way class affects and stunts social relationships' and how her characters have been 'crippled emotionally by the creed and class to which they belong.'¹² On the other hand, Frank Tuohy, although he praises Keane's talent as a narrator of high technical distinction, does not give her any credit for seriousness and qualifies *Good Behaviour* as mere good entertainment. What he cannot forgive Keane is her exclusion of political background: 'It is strange to realise that [history] is the element completely absent from the work of Molly Keane ... It shows an extraordinary detachment, indifference, or perhaps bloodmindedness.' But then Tuohy's judgement is equally excluding and its negativity a priori given by his political stance: 'My interest has been to indicate to you once again that the novel, like poetry, can flourish in conditions which might otherwise be unpropitious, and even in circumstances which must always be considered socially and morally reprehensible.'¹³ To contradict Tuohy's somewhat one-sided judgement, Anita Brookner's verdict on *Loving and Giving* is that it is not lightweight fiction as the 'determinedly lightweight tone ... is interfered with by [a] thoughtful undercurrent.'¹⁴ Polly Devlin, who has written extensively on Molly Keane's early novels, does not seem to acknowledge the darker vision of the 1980s works and commends them mainly as 'an impeccably observed ... record, full of relevance and revelation of a way of life and a vanished world that has not otherwise been given its due recognition in the country where it once existed.'¹⁵ Clare Boylan is aware of the difference between the more indulgent eye of the pseudonymous older work and Keane's 'merciless gaze' in her recent writing, where she has taken on a difficult task, 'to establish a vanished way of life and at the same time to expose it.'¹⁶ In this Boylan does not find Keane lacking. A contradiction in terms seems to me A. O. Weeks' comment: 'Keane's novels reveal lack of any moral or ethical centre under the beautiful veneer of gracious living. They never descend to polemic or class reproach, however, for the author dwells lovingly ... on the beauty of the houses, gardens, dinners, and the leisurely quality of life.' Weeks' contradictory judgement is but augmented by her final assessment of *Good Behaviour*, which, she admits, reveals 'how the same social forces responsible for

12 Mary Holland, 'Codes' in *New Statesman*, 6 Nov. 1981, p. 26.

13 Sekine, M. ed., *Irish Writers and Society at Large*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 1985, p. 204.

14 Anita Brookner, *The Spectator*, 28 September 1988, p.37.

15 Polly Devlin in Chamberlain, M. ed, *Writing Lives. Conversations Between Women Writers*. London: Virago 1988, p.122.

16 Clare Boylan in Robert Hosmer, Jr., ed. *Contemporary British Women Writers*. London: Macmillan 1993, p. 155.

the ... graciousness of Anglo-Irish ascendancy life are also responsible for the shrivelled and distorted lives of many Anglo-Irish women.¹⁷ Katie Donovan comes to Keane's rescue from what she feels to be her unjust marginalisation on account of her lack of commitment, whether to experiment in fiction or questions of what she calls 'the largely male history of ideas'. Donovan counters these charges of lack of a wider literary and public perspective with the value of Keane's 'focus on the unvoiced niches' of history.¹⁸

For Molly Keane the Big House is a class symbol rather than a myth. It certainly does not carry the emotional load of some other Big House novels, where – as in Elizabeth Bowen's *Last September* or Jennifer Johnston's *Fool's Sanctuary* – the heroines identify themselves with their houses. In contrast to that, Keane's heroines do not even particularly like their ancestral homes. Nicandra (*Loving and Giving*¹⁹) is in no hurry to return to Deer Forest after her marriage breaks down, Aroon sells Temple Alice without compunction or consideration for her mother's feelings. April in *Time After Time* is free to leave Durrroughglass and thereby withdraw her much needed financial support and she does so without regret. Her sister May's decision to burn their late Mummie's clothes, kept with piety for the last few decades, amounts to a symbolic gesture of release, of leaving the glorious and now crumbled past of the house behind. The houses are allowed to fade away from the scene with little pain or sorrow. There is a great deal of allegory in the parallel between Keane's representation of the Big House and the general decline in the social importance of the gentry in the contemporary world and the Anglo-Irish gentry in the Republic of Ireland in particular. Whatever nostalgia this allegorical parallel may imply, though, is overridden by the satirical description of what goes on inside the Big House and its inhabitants. What might be regarded as celebratory is outweighed by a critical sting. By making the Big House a site of bleak comedy, Keane declares her critical outlook.

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- 17 A. O. Weeks, *Unveiled Treasures. The Attic Guide to Irish Women Writers*. Dublin: Attic Press 1992, pp. 164–5.
- 18 Katie Donovan, *Irish Women Writers: Marginalised by Whom?* Dublin: The Raven Arts Press 1988.
- 19 Molly Keane, *Loving and Giving*, London: Andre Deutsch 1988.