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Monogamy.

About sex and love in Nick Payne's 'Wanderlust' and Penelope Skinner's 'The Village Bike'

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ABSTRACT

Monogamy has traditionally been regarded as the dominant relationship model in Western societies and behaviors that emerge as an alternative can often be perceived as divergent and threatening. In contemporary British drama, monogamy and marriage have been represented as fragile institutions, vulnerable to the pressures of everyday life. This article explores the interplay of these themes in Nick Payne's "Wanderlust" (2010), and Penelope Skinner's "The Village Bike" (2011) and focuses on the fragility of human connections shaped by sex and love. Through a comparative analysis, this article examines how these playwrights reflect the complexities of intimate relationships, revealing monogamy as a delicate and

contested ideal. The study also addresses the moralization of desire and the social repercussions of deviating from conventional norms, particularly for women. Furthermore, it delves into how the desire for an emotional connection can turn into sex, exposing the intricate reality of modern relationships, where vulnerability, temptation, and infidelity challenge established boundaries.

KEYWORDS: *monogamy, sexual desire, love, intimacy, British contemporary Drama*

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We can fuck all night if you want to. I'm not tired. Are you tired? I'm not tired at all. You could tell me all the things you ever wanted to do with me and we could do them and nobody would ever know. I love you so much it's like my body is bursting out of my skin and all I want is for you to love me in the same way and for it to be like this for ever. I know that it won't be. No. But that's what I want.
Simon Stephens *Pornography*, (2008)

In this brief passage, where desire for intimacy and connection is almost tangible, love and sex are combined in a single voice, expressing the impatience that needs eternal reassurance. I repeat: "to be like this forever". This expression, so deeply rooted in the idea of marriage, is also connected to monogamy. But even in the words of this character, this almost imaginary idea of forever seems to be just wishful thinking. Like other contemporary playwrights, Stephens dresses his characters in an emotional vulnerability, exposing the fragility of human connections and the elusive nature of these bonds.

In Nick Payne's *Wanderlust* (2010) and Penelope Skinner's *The Village Bike* (2011) - the two plays that I will use here to explore the theme of monogamy, this fragility can also be seen in terms of how the playwrights send their characters on vertiginous journeys in search of love and sex. Both plays reproduce a perception of the world in which social norms are being challenged.

Wanderlust introduces us to a couple, Joy and Alan, both in their forties, who have a son. We realize that, for some time now, the routine has settled into their marriage and that sexual desire has been affected by this. He only thinks about sex, she finds it difficult to maintain interest. In constructing the narrative, the playwright could have sought to resolve this problem through a genuine attempt at dialog and a joint search for a solution. Payne introduces the characters Stephen and Clare to further complicate the characters' struggles with desire and love.. These two characters are also the key elements in which the playwright finds a way to challenge and question the notion of monogamy.

Stephen is a friend from Joy's past who shows up at her office and slowly becomes part of her daily life. Joy initially rejects this closeness, but then it becomes a chance to discover an emotional comfort that she has been missing in her marriage. Nevertheless,

Clare, a colleague from the school where Alan works, begins to assume a more significant role by being understanding and willing to talk to him. The openness she shows in these conversations, something that also seems to be lacking in Alan's marriage, brings the two of them closer and creates an ideal mood for exploring desire. It's on a school field trip that they finally turn it into sex.

By creating these alternative paths for the characters, the playwright reinforces the idea of monogamy and marriage as fragile structures, susceptible to the disturbances and conflicts of daily life. From a different perspective, Joy and Stephen's situation remains something more emotional, more on the level of affection, while Alan and Clare's is somewhat more carnal, and more sexual, thus reinforcing the biased and stereotypical belief that women crave love, while men pursue sex.

In *'The Village Bike,'* Penelope Skinner chooses to invite the reader to peek into the intimacy of Becky and John, a couple who recently moved to the countryside and are still adapting to new routines. There are malfunctioning pipes, an unexplored village, and the boredom and frustration of Becky, who is pregnant. Amidst this new reality, Becky's libido is fiery, and although she tries to seduce her husband or encourage him to pursue the same state of mind, she feels that he is “obsessed with babies” (Skinner, 2011: 72).

As with Nick Payne's work, this play also presents a couple at risk of breaking apart, struggling to find a kind of communication that can satisfy their individual needs. The everyday life, a lack of desire or its mismatch, as well as pregnancy, are the main reasons cited for the distancing between Becky and John. The development of this narrative provides insights into the protagonist's impulses and needs and clarifies how she discovers her way of guiding her desire. Pornography is the first element explored by Becky to release all the sexual tension within her body and transcend her condition as a pregnant woman. To expand the plot, the playwright introduces a new element: Oliver, a man who comes to repair the couple's house and later sells a bicycle to Becky. By bringing these characters together, Skinner offers the possibility of building a parallel path to marriage and a new direction for desire and the pursuit of fantasies.

In this play, love, traditionally seen as the unifying force in marriage and the foundation of relationships, is strained by the pressures of daily life and the lack of sexual intimacy. Drawing on Freud's notion that sexuality underpins all human behavior, desire is depicted as a primal impulse. This impulse becomes a lens through which deviations from societal norms are explored, as the playwright uses it to challenge and critique the conventional ideals surrounding love and relationships.

While there is some predictability in the portrayal of Becky's behavior, it is important to observe the questions that Skinner raises throughout the character's journey, including, among others, the role of a woman, or a pregnant woman, within a relationship. For instance, while the playwright liberates Becky from the common role of a pregnant woman, a married woman, she also confines her within the cliché of a woman who expects that somewhere during sex, the connection between the two people will grow and evolve into something beyond sex.

For centuries, marriage was primarily considered a contract determined by economic and political interests, where love was rarely contemplated as the central reason for union. Women's roles were largely limited to reproduction and managing the household. Although the concept of romantic love emerged in the Middle Ages, it wasn't fully embraced until the Romantic period. Romanticism supported ideals closely tied to monogamy, fostering the belief that one partner could satisfy all emotional and sexual needs, reflecting a shift toward more intimate and personal conceptions of marriage. Nevertheless, even over time, this idea persisted into the contemporary era. According to philosopher Renato Noguera (2022), the inclusion of love in marriage acknowledges the possibility of "love to be attached to a legal contract (such as marriage or civil partnership), to socio-economic norms (sharing financial commitments and building wealth), and acceptable moral values (generally, Judeo-Christian, such as the union of two people, historically between a man and a woman specifically)". The social acceptance and recognition of these indicators led to the perception of love between two people as something that also belongs to the public domain. In other words, society began to comment on any action that could be considered a transgression not only against the love celebrated but also against the contract itself.

Even after decades of evolution and sexual revolutions, monogamy remains the most widely adopted and even the most preferred script in the Western world. Its structure is based on three fundamental lines: cultural, interpersonal, and psychological (Ziegler et al., 2015: 219). The intersection of these three levels establishes and regulates behaviors, rewarding those who conform to the paradigm of *normalcy* while punishing those who deviate from monogamy. This disobedience to the norm most often manifests in the form of an extramarital affair. Historian Jeffrey Weeks (2007: 140) suggests that these affairs can be “epiphanies, fateful moments, life-changing, but they are also secretive, guilt-ridden and anxiety-making. The exception is when attempts are made to negotiate non-monogamy, sustaining the emotional stability while attempting sexual autonomy”.

In 2018, *Wanderlust* was adapted by the playwright into a television series, and, contrary to the plot's development in the play, Nick Payne delves into the individual sexual space of each character, enabling Alan and Joy to establish communication. By opening this space, which we only see a glimpse of at the end of the play, they find a way to negotiate non-monogamy while attempting to rekindle desire in their marriage. This small change in the couple's dynamics alters not only the course of events but also their connection, creating room in the narrative for other subsequent themes, such as authenticity and the ability to live outside of the norm. In this televised version, the decision to embark on sexual adventures to broaden the spectrum of experiences with others heightens desire between the couple and enhances intimacy.

According to the philosopher Alan Goldman (2002: 44), love is not inherently monogamous, but, along with affection, is what most easily sustains a marriage. Similarly, he also notes that the recognition of a clear distinction between sex and love in society would help clarify when “sexual desire is mistaken for lasting love” (ibid). This illusion, whether temporary or not, is also present in the characters' behavior. In *The Village Bike*, Becky seems unable to make this distinction when driven by the excitement of her extramarital adventure with Oliver. This ambiguity is precisely caused by the thin line that separates the two concepts, especially when they are related to sex. The emotional instability

brought about by her daily life and the hormonal imbalance of pregnancy, as well as the emotional and sexual distancing from her husband, are two equally significant factors in causing this misunderstanding. Becky is portrayed as a woman who cannot distance herself from her emotions, while Oliver is depicted as a man who merely wants to have fun through sex. The recognition of the end of the relationship, where there was no commitment, ends up punishing Becky as the weaker player.

The portrayal that Skinner creates of her central female character is closely aligned with a certain moralization of desire and its consequent actions, leaving the question lingering: why are only women punished? At no point does the playwright revisit the character of Oliver, leaving it clear that he returns to the normality of his relationship with his wife without any harm or sadness. In this play, almost like a neon warning sign, monogamy reasserts itself as the only possible path for women. Although the playwright acknowledges that the play is not about punishment, the truth is that it does seem to effectively punish the female character, who ends the play with no desire to ever have sex again.

Nigel Mather (2021) argues that if we consider that someone who loves can suddenly fall in love with or desire someone else, then what is viewed as permanent can also become temporary or provisional. The same author also points out that there are many external factors such as work, earning money, or even the sharing of radically different views regarding political, cultural, or religious values, which can create tensions within a relationship and lead its protagonists to go their separate ways (ibid).

In *Wanderlust*, male behavior is often generalized and reduced to clichés. This is evident in the portrayal of Stephen's marriage, which is marked by a mundane routine of complaints, pressure to have more children, and sexual difficulties, such as struggles with erectile dysfunction. These issues are presented as justifications for his extramarital affair, reflecting stereotypical depictions of male responses to marital strain and dissatisfaction. Although, at some point, there is a brief expression of guilt, the need to reaffirm his virility and rekindle desire seems to be more significant: "Stephen – Sleeping with that girl may have been stupid, not to mention contagious, but, for one night anyway, I can't tell you

how. Incredible it felt to just. The same instinct that led me to spend the evening with that girl is the very same instinct that led me to asking you for a drink.” (Payne, 2010: 36).

This statement clearly suggests an impulse to repeat the behavior, even if it entails risks. All the male characters in the play, including Tim, the teenage son who is beginning to discover sex, seem to follow a common thread that primarily promotes the freedom of expressing male desire, regardless of the consequences, as if that were their nature and, therefore, could not be denied. On the other hand, there is a greater focus on the emotional dimension of the female characters. Payne also characterizes them as those who take the first step toward sex, or as those who know more about sex than men, without any restraint in their expression. Similarly, the married woman is portrayed as the romantic who dreams of the past in her relationship, who craves affection but is also someone whose libido has disappeared. As for the single woman, she is depicted as the adventurer, who freely expresses her desire and ends her relationship because she realizes she is not being true to herself.

However, in *The Village Bike*, the female protagonist is represented as desperate. The lack of love and sex in such a delicate stage of her life seems to be the driving force behind all her actions. It's as if the playwright creates this kind of tension to be carried not only by the character herself but also by the reader. The first significant moment of release from this sexual tension and desire occurs when Oliver delivers the bicycle, symbolizing a turning point in her quest for liberation. It's as though Becky could no longer tolerate it, and, regardless of the consequences, needed to act: “I just want to say/ *She touches his chest. Her breathing changes. He doesn't move. She touches his face. She makes a noise like an animal. A small cry, exactly halfway between pain and pleasure. And suddenly they are kissing.*” (Skinner, 2011: 60). At this point, the playwright allows her character to be free, giving her the possibility to respond to her desires in a raw, instinctive way. However, in the next moment, this liberation is overshadowed by a sense of guilt: “I don't do this like this”, “It's just not me. I love my husband” (Skinner, 2011: 61). There is love, there is regret, but there is also a desire to fantasize.

In conclusion, *Wanderlust* and *The Village Bike* depict characters trapped in a state of unhappiness or dissatisfaction when it comes to their primary relationships. The possibility of feeling loved or desired again is momentarily revived through extramarital encounters, allowing the playwrights to find ways to explore and challenge the concept of monogamy. However, this doesn't mean that the characters have lost faith in love or in the idea of being with one person. Instead, their core relationships fail to fulfill their sexual and emotional needs, and the search for alternatives - whether actively or passively, ends up taking center stage in the plays.

Although much has changed in social customs and behaviors - and history shows us that there have been times more conservative as well as more liberal regarding sex, marriage, and monogamy - the truth is that even today, individual decisions and expressions are subject to public scrutiny and censorship.

The transgression of societal boundaries and what is morally acceptable deconstructs the fallacious idea that the body always accepts imposed limits. The existence of monogamy appears more as a tool for categorizing relationships and sustaining a well-ordered society governed by norms that everyone knows and should respect than as a benefit to. Therefore, what these plays show us is that monogamy exists to standardize and normalize behavior. Because, as we see, what happens behind closed doors, well, that's another different story.

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