

The Morality of the Miniskirt

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For many historians hailing from a generation of second wave feminism, the study of fashion is considered trite and is often dismissed. However, fashion provides us with a scope for study in all aspects of women's lives. It is clear from the oral history work undertaken by Catriona Clear and through the contemporary press that clothing and appearance were of significant importance to the majority of women.²⁴ In order to gain a full and balanced view of Irish society in the 1960s it would be wrong to eliminate studies on women's appearance. It is possible to gain a perspective on the matters of most importance to women from the problem pages of magazines, it also indicates how people spent their money and what people wore to an event gives an indication of the importance of the event to the attendee. Clear correctly asserts that the neglect of study in women's appearance in the past is a serious neglect among historians of the study of women's culture.²⁵ Furthermore, the standards of women's dress and debates on the issue also give an indication of concerns of morality in the period discussed. This will be addressed through a study of the miniskirt, easily the most controversial trend of the decade. This essay will attempt to prove that the debate over miniskirts reflected the debate on the changing role of women in Irish society, and the standards Irish women were expected to aspire to. Many of the discussions around the miniskirt challenged established beliefs on female sexuality and the standards of domesticity placed on Irish wives and mothers, especially in regard to young women. Evidence for this argument is primarily sourced from the national and regional press, but it is reinforced by academic articles and media contemporary to the period.

During the 1960s, young women were recognised as a growing and im-

24 Clear, Caitriona. 'The Minimum Rights of Every Woman?' Women's changing appearance in Ireland 1940-1966, in *Irish Economic and Social History*, Vol.35, (2008), p. 69. Clear argues that fashion was of considerable significance to the interviewees as many discussed fashion with enthusiasm without any prompt.

25 *Ibid.*

portant consumer base, and advertisements changed to accommodate this new target market. Fashion occupied a highly gendered space. Even the briefest study of the press demonstrates without question that fashion was set firmly in a female domain. For example, the male winners of the 'New Spotlight teenage dance award 1968' won a £125 Yamaha voucher. In contrast, there was 'a day's wardrobe shopping for the girl and a night out with her partner, or favourite beat artist'.²⁶ The female prize is much more ambiguous it does not have set definitions or values. This could indicate that the prize was less important. This statement indicates that fashion was decidedly linked to sexual desirability and romance. Implicit in this prize is the assumption that the winner will wear her prize outfit on her night out with a partner. However, the Yamaha vouchers are intended for the purchase of Yamaha musical instruments. The male contestant was encouraged to pursue hobbies other than fashion.²⁷ The hobby of music could lead to an extremely prosperous career, while on the other hand girls were expected to aspire to romance and domesticity.

Clear argues that examining women's clothing purely in relation to the response it generated from conservative society, especially the clergy, is the wrong approach.²⁸ By viewing women's dress only in relation to the reaction it garnered from these conservative members of society, we do not get a complete picture of women's culture during the period. However, it is still a worthwhile line of enquiry which could inform further discussion. The miniskirt and its possible implications on the morality of the wearer were widely debated nationally and internationally.

The miniskirt was widely popularised by the London designer Mary Quant, and was launched in 1965.²⁹ The style was unprecedented given the popular fashions of the previous three decades. William H. Reynolds, professor of Marketing in the University of Illinois, discussed how the trend moved from one phase to the next in 1968.

26 *New Spotlight Magazine*, 22 June 1968, p.3.

27 The music industry was extremely lucrative at this time, which adds a greater dimension to the male prize as it was possible to earn a great deal of money through music, this opportunity was not offered to the female winner. See Vincent Power, *Send 'Em Home Sweatin': The Irish Showband Story*. (Cork, 1990) Chp. 1

28 Clear. 'The Minimum Rights of Every Woman?'

29 Arthur Marwick: *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States c.1958-c.1974*. (Oxford, 1999), p.446.

'One would have thought considering social mores and the history of short skirts- that mid-thigh would be the point at which the trend to shorter skirts would have to stop. In fact, the concomitant fashions of leotards and tights made skirts much shorter than this to satisfy the requirement of modesty.'³⁰

He argued that the miniskirt actually became shorter as it became more popular and fashions changed to accommodate it. Furthermore, it was easy to produce on a mass scale or in the home. Reynolds's article indicates that the miniskirt was taken very seriously as a phenomenon by those with commercial interests in fashion as early as 1968. The miniskirt spoke of youth and liberation. It has been eulogised as a symbol of the modernity and the sexual liberation of the sixties. It was certainly the most defining fashion trend of the decade, precisely because it was such a dramatic break with previous styles. The connection between the miniskirt and the decade of the 1960s was solidified very quickly. In 1970, RTÉ's Newsbeat, discussed the fashion of the preceding decade, focusing specifically on the phenomenon of the miniskirt as the principal item of discussion. The programme showed footage of dozens of women walking around Dublin City, all of them wearing miniskirts. It is possible to discern from the footage that by the end of the decade, a large proportion of women in a variety of ages wore mini skirts, with tights, bare legs, boots, flat shoes and high heels in a variety of shapes and styles.^{31 32}

However, this popular trend immediately caused controversy, in Ireland and abroad. By the end of the decade many American school boards had ruled that girls could not wear skirts to school that sat more than five inches above the knee.³³ Immodest dress was already criticised as a gateway to bad behaviour from young people. A contemporary article on teenage magazines in the USA cited a letter from a mother condemning such magazines.

30 William H. Reynolds 'Cars and Clothing: Understanding Fashion Trends' *Journal of Marketing*, Vol.32, No.3 (Jul. 1968), p.45.

31 <http://www.rte.ie/archives/2015/0410/693179-60s-fashion-mini-skirts-and-knees/aired/10/April/1970>, accessed 17/02/2017.

32 This is despite the fact that most press discussion at the time entered around young women wearing mini skirts. By the time the mini was largely accepted by the end of the decade, the press largely maintained that it was a trend for young people.

33 Marwick, *The Sixties* p.446.

'Any fan of yours spends his time failing at school, talking back to his parents....wearing sensual, revealing clothing'.³⁴

In the eyes of some commentators, there was a clear link between revealing clothing and bad or immoral behaviour. In the Western world, the style was as quickly condemned for being overtly sexual. Of course, women's fashions have always been criticised by commentators for defying the established norms of femininity and sexuality. Just, prior to the debate on miniskirts in Ireland, women were condemned for wearing trousers. One reader to *The Sunday Press* wrote to the Agony Aunt Angela McNamara to complain 'My father does not approve of slacks'.³⁵ Women were banned from wearing trousers in UCD until 'a mass protest by women students all wearing trousers stormed the corridors and put paid to that rule'.³⁶ This indicates that there was a willingness from young women to defend their choices, which illustrates the conviction they held in the decisions they made, and their desire for these choices to be accepted by society. This may seem like a trite and simplistic reading of a more complex and wider issue, but fashion, long held in the domain of women, was a tool for liberation. Women took control of this sphere and defended their right to wear trousers, despite the decision of college authorities, and this can be seen as a symptom of wider changes to come for women. A similar action took place in 1973 when 600 trainee teachers in Carysfort college went on strike to defend their right to wear miniskirts to college.³⁷

A debate on the virtues and threats of the miniskirt was quickly established in the Irish media. The letters to the editor of *The Sunday Independent* outline the issue to an Irish readership. One reader wrote (against the mini skirt) 'let me champion the cause for modesty and to congratulate all the good people who have written in its defence'.³⁸ Another reader to the

34 Charles H. Brown, Self-Portrait: The Teen-Type Magazine, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol.338, *Teen-Age Culture* (Nov. 1961), p.15. (It is fair to assume that in this instance he/his also refers to females)

35 Tony Farmer, *Privileged lives: A Social History of the Middle Class in Ireland 1882-1989*, (Dublin, 2010) p.230.

36 Anonymous UCD Graduate 1969, <https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/A%20Snapshot%20of%20UCD%20in%20the%201960s%20jb.pdf> p.1, Accessed 17/02/2017.

37 *The Irish Independent*, 23 March 1973.

38 Ibid.

Sunday Independent wrote that though they 'don't think miniskirts look bad on teenagers or young girls' they took objection to 'young married, expectant mothers in....tight fitting sleeveless frocks above their knees'.³⁹ The skirt was quickly placed in the realm of young women. It is helpful to compare this statement to some established historiography on the depiction of women in the press and on women's dress in this period. Susan Weiner argues that the depiction of women in the French magazine *Elle* was ultimately a depiction of a woman as a housewife and mother. It was not until the advent of *Mademoiselle*, a magazine dedicated solely to teenagers that the narrative began to shift from that of the domestic, 'perfect' housewife. As Weiner argues, this shift was not so dramatic as to imply that married life and motherhood were anything other than an inevitability for the majority.⁴⁰

This argument can also be applied to Irish women and is reinforced by evidence from Irish Women's magazines and letters pages, and image of the good mother and housewife was well documented in the Irish press.⁴¹ The advent of the miniskirt altered this image. Catriona Clear argues that there was an emphasis on respectability and maturity in the fashions of the 1950s. Nearly all the women photographed in newspapers in the 1950s wore a suit. Women also commonly wore suits when getting married, or as their going away outfit at their weddings as they began to embark on 'adult' life. A suit indicated the wearer's capability and respectability. Nuala Costello, the women's editor of *The Irish Independent* wrote that people were 'far more likely to trust the intelligence of a woman whose intelligence has been brought to bear on her own affairs rather than...the woman whose ungroomed looks proclaim that she is indifferent to her practical, personal affairs'.⁴² The miniskirt, glamorised by the young, trendy and carefree models of the Kings Road in London, was in direct contrast to this. It did not symbolise the capability and respectability that was expected of motherhood. The image of 'young, married, expectant mothers' in short dresses defied the established norms of respectability and the images that were pre-

39 *The Sunday Independent*, 29th October 1967, p.21.

40 Susan Weiner, 'Two Modernities: From 'Elle' to Mademoiselle'. *Women's Magazines in Postwar France' Contemporary European History*, Vol. 8, No.3, (Nov.1999), p.407.

41 See Paul Ryan, *Asking Angela McNamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives* (Dublin, 2012) for further examples of this.

42 Clear, 'The Minimum Rights of Every Woman?', p.75.

sented of motherhood in the domestic and international press at the time. *Woman's Way* described the mother and housewife as 'the symbol of stability and the focal point upon which everything in our country depends.'⁴³ The winner of the *Woman's Way* ideal housewife competition was the 'youthful and pretty Mrs. McStay' from Ballyfermot, the mother of eleven children, the ideal image of the Irish wife and mother.

The reader who objected to expectant mothers wearing 'tight-fitting sleeveless frocks above their knees' was further incensed by the fact that 'they even went to Mass and the altar rail in that awful fashion'.⁴⁴ Despite the fact that these young women were living up to the ideal standards of domesticity at the time (they produced children within marriage, they attended mass and therefore presumably conformed to Catholic teaching) the reader took greater objection to these young women's appearance than their behaviour. Peter Lennon's 1967 documentary film 'The Rocky Road to Dublin' depicts a young schoolboy paraphrasing the New Catechism in response to the teacher's query 'What are the chief dangers to chastity?'. Among the students answer is the phrase is the 'wearing very miniskirts', he smiles hopefully after saying this, perhaps indicating the topical nature of such a debate.⁴⁵ This extract indicates that clothing which was deemed to be immodest was directly linked to committing a mortal sin. It is clear that even those who were presumably not in danger of committing the sin of sex outside wedlock (ie. young, married mothers) were not exempt from the implications of this code of dress. One reader of *The Sunday Independent* felt compelled to advise 'Good responsible mothers educate and exalt their daughters and leave the dance hall to the cheap skite of a miniskirted girl.'⁴⁶ This sort of attitude was not consistent with everybody. One commentator indicated that miniskirts were a beacon of modernity and youth and condemned the critics:

'I have heard a lot of criticism about miniskirts from people who live in the back end of the world, such as Pullathomas, Carratigue and Auhoose... I happened to go to a dance in Aughoose. Instead of the girls

43 *Woman's Way Weekly*, Nov. 21st 1969, p.2.

44 *The Sunday Independent*, 29 Oct 1967, p.21.

45 *Rocky Road to Dublin*, 1967.

46 *The Sunday Independent*, 4 August 1968, p.15.

wearing skirts four inches above the knee...they wore their skirts six inches below the knee like old maids.'⁴⁷

In *Rocky Road to Dublin*, there was a marked difference in the skirt lengths of the women filmed at a beat club, which were shorter in contrast to women of a similar age filmed at a tennis club dance. The beat club was considered to be more radical than the traditional dance spaces.⁴⁸

Women were not trusted not to commit or encourage immoral acts whilst wearing miniskirts. This is clearly indicated by a letter from 'mini-fan, Balla' who wrote to *The Connaught Telegraph*. The reader describes an incident where, shortly after entering the ballroom in Balla, three girls (not locals, visitors to the town on holiday) wearing miniskirts were approached by a member of the clergy. The girls then left after their exchange, they returned a short time later, no longer wearing miniskirts, but 'slacks and shirts to match'.⁴⁹ The reader concluded by voicing their amazement that 'there was no objection to all the other girls wearing miniskirts at the same dance. When advising why not start at our own town, not at strangers who we may never see again'.⁵⁰ The anecdote is interesting for a number of reasons, the reader is clearly not blind to the hypocrisy of the treatment of the local girls compared to the outsiders. These young women were clearly viewed by the clergy as a corrupting influence on the locals gathered in the ballroom, partly because they were wearing miniskirts. The other indicator was their outsider status. They could not be held accountable to the moral standards and norms of the local community, therefore it was deemed that they could not be trusted, or exercise responsible behaviour whilst wearing mini skirts and were asked to change.

There was also controversy following a ban on miniskirts at the 'Miss Associated Ballrooms' beauty contest at the Galway heat. One of the entrants; twenty-one year old Nuala Brown stated 'mini- skirts are far too short, unladylike and disgraceful and I would not wear one for a contest if it was allowed.'⁵¹ This was countered by her fellow competitor Ann Tuttle who

47 *Western People*, 26 August 1967, p. 13.

48 See Carol Holohan, "Challenges to Social Order and Irish Identity? Youth Culture in the Sixties". *Irish Historical Studies*, XXXVIII (no. 151): pp. 389-405.

49 *Connaught Telegraph*, 31 August 1967, p.6.

50 Ibid.

51 *Sunday Independent*, 18 October 1966.

said that it was 'a matter of individual taste...if a girl wanted to wear a mini she should be allowed to do so'.⁵² Competitions of this sort, such as the Ideal Housewife competition or a beauty contest are interesting arenas for this discussion. These competitions *raison d'être* is the pursuit of the perfect or ideal woman, such a woman who would conform to societal norms. It is significant that miniskirts were banned from the competition, this clearly implies that miniskirts defied societal norms. This extract also indicates that this debate did not fall on either side of a generational divide, we see two disparate opinions from two women of the same age, from similar areas. (Tuam and Clare-Galway)

Miniskirts were considered a tool for seduction, to generate delinquency and immorality. One correspondent with Angela MacNamara's column in *Woman's Way* certainly felt so:

'I'm a young man of twenty and sick of girls throwing themselves at me and seducing men by wearing ghastly miniskirts. I've never seen so many fat legs, but they are still so cheaply seductive. Girls will have to answer for a great deal. Why have they no self respect?'⁵³

McNamara responded that the letter spoke for itself, 'first that men want to meet girls that have some self respect', 'second that there are certainly good men left, but that they depend on the help they get from the girls to keep them on the right road'. Women, and teenage girls were expected to be the gatekeepers for morality, to prevent men from committing sin. To the modern reader, it is easy to scoff at the reader's letter. In another letter on the topic of the miniskirt, McNamara wrote 'girls who chose to wear immodest clothes are inviting boys to treat them cheaply.'⁵⁴ However, implicit in the arguments about miniskirts was the understanding that women's sexuality offered them scope for power within their spheres. 'An Irish Housewife' suggested that wives negotiating a change to the household allowance with their husbands that 'a frilly nightdress will get better results than a browbeating.'⁵⁵

52 Ibid.

53 *Woman's Way Weekly*, March 1968.

54 Paul Ryan, *Asking Angela McNamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives*, (Dublin, 2012) p.51.

55 *An Irish Housewife, I'm Not Afraid to Die*, (Cork, 1974) p.119. quoted in Farmer, *Privileged Lives*, p. 203.

Agony Aunts also advised that it was the female's role to prevent intercourse from occurring outside of marriage.⁵⁶ This approach was not unique to Ireland. An American teenage magazine published the following advice.

'Wearing low-cut blouses and terribly tight skirts doesn't look a bit nice, and gets the wrong kind of attention...If you find yourself in a predicament with a boy, check your own actions before you start blaming him.'⁵⁷

This letter was published in 1961, and does not relate specifically to the miniskirt but the point still stands. Girls were seen as the wardens of sexual morality. 'Immodest' dress compromised this position. Sexual transgression could be constructed as an affront to the established social order, a mortal sin which could result in children born out of wedlock. It could also be constructed as an erosion of the traditional family unit, which was so exalted in the press of the day, as seen above in *Woman's Way's* Perfect Housewife contest. As illustrated above, the miniskirt was linked to sexual transgression. Implicit in the criticism of the miniskirt was that miniskirt wearers either intended on seduction or rendered their partners incapable of resisting their sexual overtones. However, not all commentators were keen to uphold the norm, as this extract illustrates.

'The miniskirt may be objectionable to your correspondent 'traditionalist'. But what is in it for the traditional Irish girl? She has always had a raw deal as girlfriend, wife and mother. She was treated like chattel.'⁵⁸

This indicates that the image of the perfect Irish woman was inherently flawed, it also illustrates how discussions of the miniskirt facilitated challenges to this narrative.

In conclusion, a survey of attitudes to the miniskirt in Ireland during this period gives us a greater understanding of ordinary Irish life in this period. It is possible to gain a comprehensive picture of the expectations and narrative of moral and physical perfection placed on Irish women and girls. The

56 See Ryan, *Asking Angela McNamara; New Spotlight Weekly* 4 November 1967.

57 Brown, *The Teen-Type Magazine*, p.17.

58 *The Sunday Independent*, 28 July 1968 p.16.

miniskirt was controversial because of its departure with previous styles, and the shorter length was immediately equated by commentators with encouraging sexual licentiousness. It added a further challenge to the idea that women were the gatekeepers of sexual morality. These themes are consistent with the wider transnational narrative on the subject. It is clear that in the United States, France and Britain that the miniskirt generated anxieties about women's behaviour. It is also evident that the miniskirt was largely associated with young women and this created an unease between two generations, despite the fact that some young people were amongst the detractors of the miniskirt. The continued popularity of the miniskirts is testament to the ineffectiveness of the tactics employed by the skirts detractors in curbing the wearing of the garment. This is symptomatic of wider Irish society where conservative criticism was becoming less influential during this period.

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