

A Portrait of the Artist as an Angry Young Man: Masculinities and the Male Artist in Twentieth-Century British Literature

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A thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in English

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The Pre-Revolution Irish National Artist .....	14
Chapter Two: The Post-WWII Angry Young Man .....	40
Chapter Three: The 90s “Cool” Tabloid Journalist .....	70
Bibliography .....	97

## Abstract

Influenced by post-Lacanian psychoanalytic feminist theory and Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity, this project examines three fictional brooding male writers from three separate periods of twentieth-century Ireland and Britain and their performances of authenticity, authority, and exceptionalism as artist figures. By tracing a sociohistorical arc and conducting close literary analyses, this project argues that the myth of white male artistic genius is derived from the power and privilege of a cult of individuality that can be used to excuse and justify harmful behaviour and that comes at the exclusion and expense of those outside this highly specific version of hegemonic masculinity. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* undermine the myth of male artistic genius by exposing the artificial and theatrical nature of the notion of "authenticity" and the posture of being countercultural when one is part of a dominating elite.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to give special thanks to my thesis supervisor, Dr. James Brooke-Smith, for his insightful and generous intellectual guidance and moral support. It was a privilege and pleasure to work with you. Your far-reaching wealth of knowledge, as well as your enthusiasm for language and literature, is inspiring.

Thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the University of Ottawa for providing financial support for my research.

Furthermore, I am lucky and grateful to have such an extensive emotional support system. Thank you to my parents, for their unwavering patience and encouragement. Thank you to my friends for their enthusiastic confidence in my abilities and for keeping me healthy. Finally, thank you to my animals for providing me companionship and cuddles throughout this process.

## Introduction

The heroic artist is a prominent trope in British literary and cultural history, and it is one that writers have continually explored as part of a self-conscious interest in the role of the artist. According to this trope, the artist is an inspired visionary, a prophet-like figure marked by potency, legitimacy, and creativity. Often a solitary genius and tortured outsider following the inclinations of his desires in self-imposed exile, he is romanticized as a countercultural rebel who is more authentic and honest than the masses because he is more attuned to beauty and truth. The myth of the artist-genius celebrates a dominating elite that emphasizes artistic vision and feeling as proof of cultural authority and leadership, where the artist's personal pain is perceived as having a general, social validity. Above all, the artist-genius is almost invariably male and Caucasian. This cultural myth of masculine power and privilege as "unacknowledged legislators of the world" as Percy Bysshe Shelley writes in "A Defense of Poetry" (Shelley 90), is evident in the writings, as well as the personae of, the major male poets of British Romanticism, most notably Lord Byron and his eponymous Byronic hero, along with nineteenth-century French Symbolists like Arthur Rimbaud, Stephane Mallarme, and Charles Baudelaire who especially promoted the notion of the alienated artist. While the heroically alienated, masculine artist has precedents since long before the Romantic period, the Romantics made particularly prominent the artist's modern subjectivity with their emphasis on the artist's individual psychology. This conception of the modern artist and his unique interiority was subsequently affirmed by the high Victorian cult of the "poet-prophet," an esteemed role ascribed, and often self-ascribed, to male British writers like Thomas Carlyle, Alfred Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold—the last of whom popularized the term, "philistines," to disparagingly describe the Victorian English middle classes as ignorant and indifferent to art and culture. Thus, while part of the myth of artistic

genius is a genuine, serious view of art, part of it also comes from a performance of intellectual elitism. As a self-fashioned and cultivated image of self-understanding, the male artist-genius is an excessive and inconsistent character. The masculine bravura of his persona indicates an effortless but effortful performance of genius: a personality that is both authentic and contrived.

In the twentieth century, British writers were exploring, expanding, and complicating the popular image of the brooding male writer in their representations of male artist figures. This project compares three notoriously controversial protagonists in twentieth-century Irish and British literature and their performance of the heroic male artist myth. Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), and Ian Jones in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) are defined by the contradictory traits that often characterize the male artist: they are sensitive but cruel, victims but aggressors, feminized or infantilized but aggressively masculine. Their attitudes toward the world around them are characterized as simultaneous idealism and cynicism. Their rhetoric is specific but vague, liberal but conservative, sincere but ironic. While the three characters represent idiosyncratic personalities, they also represent a type. As Joyce, Osborne, and Kane illustrate in their protagonists, the myth of the artist-genius often goes together with artists exhibiting harmful behaviour, notably narcissism, machismo, and misogyny, as the myth provides the justification and impetus for problematic behaviour as natural moral and intellectual superiority, especially when these artists feel a lack of understanding and acknowledgement from those around them. As Baudelaire argues, the "disenchanted" artist's "willed estrangement exemplifies a new sense of the incompatibility between artistic vocation and social obligation"; he championed the modern artist's "individualism which requires a radical, and often violent, demarcation of limits and boundaries" and "a sense of self [that] has...to be acquired at the

expense of the other” (Nicholls 12-5). Stephen, Jimmy, and Ian represent artist-outsiders who are sensitive, emotional, and thoughtful, but the manifestations of this position are also often marked by displacement, anger, and/or violence. The characters present, in varying degrees and capacities, a sense of aggrieved entitlement towards women and/or “feminized” men, i.e. homosexual and racialized men, as hegemonic masculinity and the artist figure are structured in relation to an “Other.”

By the end of the nineteenth century, the general devaluation and ultimate displacement of the principal role played by art, literature, and their most distinguished practitioners as the primary means of understanding the world led to a renewed, vigorous defense of the artist within modernist movements. Particularly with the case of Joyce and Stephen and to a lesser extent with Osborne and Jimmy, there is a twentieth-century modernist commitment to the potency of the avant-garde—a masculine, military metaphor in and of itself (vanguard)—in invoking and perpetuating the myth of male artistic genius unironically, despite the fact that the authors also at times unravel it as parodic and exaggerated. As Stephen, Jimmy, and Ian experience “emasculating” events and conditions in their respective historical, social, and political contexts as impassioned artist figures, they reassert their manhood through an emphasis on sexual power relations and reconfirmation of their artistry. Thus, the correlation between the performance of machismo and of authentic artistic genius indicates that despite shunning society and being shunned by society, the characters still identify themselves within the boundaries of cultural ideologies that serve to assert and maintain male hegemonic power. They often display homosexual panic in grappling with long-standing cultural assumptions that associate artistry and male homosexuality, working to re-masculinize art and aesthetics. Though Stephen, Jimmy, and Ian passionately conceive of themselves as the voices of critique for society’s problems and

shortcomings in contrast to their ostensibly ineffectual female or feminized counterparts, they are also the objects of authorial critique in that Joyce, Osborne, and Kane depict their protagonists as complex characters who manifest the limited and limiting logic of hegemonic masculinity. The characters conduct a performance of masculinity that is exclusionary, but the texts suggest the potential for positive change, indicated by their ambiguously optimistic endings and disruption of the social realist form.

Despite major differences in genre and format as reflective of the cultural trends and movements of the authors' vastly separate time periods and perspectives, what all three texts have in common in terms of form is that they employ social realism to end up subverting it. Starting with Joyce and his modernist experimentation with the realist form in *Portrait*, the texts highlight the tensions between old and new, between tradition and cultural renewal. From the use of stream of consciousness narration in Joyce, to the periodic turn to childlike play and whimsy in Osborne, to the complete collapse into abstraction in Kane, form reflects content as the fragmentations, contradictions, and innovations of style reflect the authors' reworkings of the artist character and of masculinities. The texts demonstrate that at the center of the artist-genius's psychomachia is the tension between self-creation and honesty, and performance and theatricality. The authors' rhetorical and narrative techniques ironize the characters' posture of authenticity that can be employed to excuse harmful and unethical attitudes, while they allow for sympathy for the same characters. Joyce, Osborne, and Kane also grant their characters some degree of self-awareness, as Stephen, Jimmy, and Ian at times recognize and interpret their own problematic behaviour, though this self-awareness is limited.

Stephen, Jimmy, and Ian represent crises of masculinity and the inability to cope in an age marked by ambiguity and anxiety about the breakdown of traditional social categories such

as gender, race, nationality, and class. The protagonists of *Portrait*, *Look Back*, and *Blasted* reflect broader sociohistorical moments when men started to suffer increasing feelings of insecurity and displacement. This project focuses on a twentieth-century British and Irish context, taking note of the significance of national identity in the construction of masculinities. *Portrait*, *Look Back*, and *Blasted* refer explicitly to domestic politics, providing references and insight to the social and cultural landscape of each text's contemporary moment. Examining the specific historical contexts in which these texts were written illuminates how each author presents his or her character as a "victim" in his contemporary culture, and how each presents the artist-protagonist as an idealized figure of rebellion and innate artistic genius as well as a satirized figure characterized by impotency. As the myth of the male artist expresses contradictory motivations and is altogether a shaky trope as the distinction between authenticity and performance continually collapses, this project demonstrates that the role of the artist is a theme which fascinates writers of different time periods and political ideologies because of the contentious cultural position of the artist as both insider and outsider to the workings of society. The authors themselves bear the same performative mythology of artist-genius, including Kane who as an "over-rated interloper, honorary lad, confrontational bad girl, funny, depressive, tortured suicidal artist, theatrical visionary, saviour and prophet," occupied a position seldom afforded to female writers (Iball 2).

In terms of critical approach, this project is largely influenced and informed by Judith Butler's foundational theories of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is never fixed or finished nor an inherent essence of the self, but a project that constantly needs to be reiterated, consciously or unconsciously, through a range of outward, semiotic phenomena, including speech acts and stylizations of the body, that are socially determined and that give the illusion of

solidity and permanence to gender identity. However, Butler maintains the notion of agency in that there is the potential for non-compliance, or the mis-performance, of binary gender norms, expectations, and rules. In addition, R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity—"the 'form of masculinity which is culturally dominant in a given setting' and 'can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy'"—is invaluable in providing a theoretical framework for this project, as the male artist represents both a deviation and a reinstatement of hegemonic masculinity (qtd. in Horlacher 8). Other concepts used in this project include that of the "feeling male body" which emphasizes male embodiment counter to prevailing cultural binaries and assumptions that equate men to culture and the mind, and women to nature and the body. Traditionally understood to be feminine, feeling as demonstrated in Stephen, Jimmy, and Ian undermines, but reinstates masculinity in the figure of the male artist in that the artist's vulnerability is a source of resistance and power. In contrast to the female characters who ostensibly represent inauthentic feeling—as "either unfeeling or hysterical" (Brook 48)—the male artists represent not only authenticity, but also virility and phallic power in artmaking, as the process of men's creativity and labour becomes compared to women's childbearing. Examining the depiction of the male body in these texts goes together with examining the texts' use of performativity in breaking down the myth of the male artist, as hetero-masculine identity is shaped in part by repressions of male embodiment despite the fact that the male body and its performativity are integral to the construction of manliness.

According to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the capacity to assume a symbolic position as a signifying subject under paternal law involves disavowing modes of corporeality, repressing libidinal desires, and repudiating the primary relationship to the maternal body (Butler, "Gender

Trouble” 107). As such, this project draws influence from post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, namely Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as it relates to the transgression of the borders and boundaries of identity. Drawing from Kristeva’s popular feminist interpretation, abjection, or “the state of being cast off,” describes the founding and traumatic moment of separation of the child from the mother (birth) and the bodily expulsion of substances and fluid. The experience of abjection establishes bodily boundaries by reinforcing the distinction between inner and outer and between Self and Other. These boundaries can be breached, implying that the subject can be absorbed into a suffocating relationship with the image of the mother, who is feared as a potential cannibal. In short, the abject is that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). *Portrait, Look Back*, and *Blasted* not only depict abjection in terms of the psycho/physiological—concerning bodily production, leakage, expulsion, and defilement; but also, in terms of the sociopolitical—the abject as the degraded and marginalized peoples of the dominant social order. As Butler writes, abjection is “the mode by which Others become shit” (“Gender Trouble” 182).

Thus, this project employs both individualist, psychological theories of gender as well as sociological-based theories, as it considers the interplay between the personal and subjective experiences of Stephen, Jimmy, and Ian along with “masculinities as social structures, embedded in institutions, practices, and ideologies” (Brod 29). The above theories as the methodologies for analysing these texts maintain the notion of individual agency and emphasize the capacity for constructive social change, as all three texts also suggest. As performativity and abjection are based in a constant maintenance of an appearance of “properness,” an oscillation between the symbolic and the semiotic, they indicate the impossibility of arriving at a fixed identity. Thus, the possibility of intentional or unintentional slippage in identification is where the potential for

change arises. Furthermore, as the theories of hegemonic masculinity relate to Gramscian theories of cultural hegemony, the adjective “hegemonic” emphasizes that it refers to the dominant order and not total dominance: other masculinities exist alongside and can become increasingly visible (Connell in Horlacher 8). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity evolves as social dynamics and national narratives change; together, they are relational constructs that vary and alter through time and space and with new formulations of gender norms. As the theme of the artist’s role in society is one that is constantly reworked throughout centuries of western literature, there is also new criticism to be done, especially with contemporary discussions and emerging areas of study taking hold, such as masculinities studies and postcolonial studies. Within the scope of this thesis, examining three texts from early, mid, and late twentieth-century Irish and British literature allows for an investigation into how performances of masculinities and their relations to artistic performance have changed over the course of the century. This project emphasizes the fluctuation of the concept of masculinity through time and how earlier scripts of masculinity influence later articulations and interpretations, as it analyzes three texts of different genres, formats, and intents by three authors of different time periods, political ideologies, and perspectives. As this project demonstrates, the brooding white male artist-genius receives less and less sympathetic treatment as the century moves forward, indicating the increasing loss of the narrative trope’s stability and the increasing mistrust in the hegemonic power that it supports, due to new ways of thinking about identity with the growing influence of feminism and changing social roles.

This project is a contribution to the field of masculinities studies, an emerging field of study within gender and feminist studies, and within literary criticism. As white male protagonists in literature have almost always had the privilege, but also the curse, to be

generalized as generic human characters, the task of masculinities studies is to “recapture the specificities of masculinities as specific and varying social, cultural, and historical formations alongside femininities, rather than as falsely universalized norms” (Brod 20). Examining masculinities as inflected by race, class, nationality, and sexuality, this study brings white masculinity to the forefront, refusing impulses to forget about straight white men as if they have no sex or race, “remaining unexamined and therefore unexposed...unremarkable and therefore unremarked upon” (Brod 30). In addition, as Harry Brod contends, studying the constructions of masculinities is important because a universalizing image of a singular masculinity ends up as a simulacrum, or a “caricature,” representing “no one’s lives as they actually lived and experienced them”; instead, there is a need for a plurality of masculinities and identities in which men can recognize themselves and be recognized by others (Brod 25). That being said, while analyzing and writing about men and masculinities, it is important not to disregard the roles of women within these texts. While this project focuses mostly on the psychodynamics of the male protagonists of *Portrait*, *Look Back*, and *Blasted*, the intention is not to make excuses for and defend Stephen, Jimmy, Ian, or other men’s problematic attitudes and ignore the experience of women. Rather, to tease out and attempt to understand these men’s rationalizations and logic for their behaviour as well as to pay attention to how they feel is to step towards identifying the appeal and danger of masculine ideals to devise positive social change in the broader world outside the texts, to make lives more liveable for everyone. Thus, the goal is neither to celebrate these male artist figures, nor to condemn them. This project also does not argue that male artistry and misogyny go hand-in-hand and that all men with artistic sensibilities have an inclination for chauvinism. Instead, the emphasis is on the connection between art and artifice and mis-

performance that signals agency and the possibility for change despite gendered discourses of power that are entrenched within cultural mythology.

This project presents a broad historical sweep over twentieth-century British literature and cannot address all iterations of the myth of the artist-genius. Instead, it presents just three noteworthy examples of male artists in three representative primary texts set during three distinct times in British history when the artist-genius became increasingly visible. *Portrait* depicts the rebel of pre-revolution Ireland “forg[ing] the uncreated conscious of [his] race” against British imperialist discourses that feminized the Irish as “deficient in manhood and so unready for emancipation” (Joyce 224; Valente, “Myth of Manliness” 11). *Look Back* depicts the angry young man of the post-WWII generation who feels abandoned in “a period of flux and of transition between modernity—with its utopian faith in progress—and postmodernity—characterized by radical pluralism and the proliferation of decentered, multiple identities” (Brook 1). *Blasted* depicts the tabloid journalist writing during 1990s’ Cool Britannia, a period of mass consumer culture and national pride that blurred the lines between art, politics, and popular media.

Chapter one discusses Joyce’s novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and the character of Stephen Dedalus. Contrary to the views of Hugh Kenner, who recognizes that he is often cited as “the bellwether of the Stephen-hating school of critics,” Joyce presents in Stephen a sensitive and perceptive figure with energy, creativity, and determination (360). Kenner oversimplifies the complexity of Stephen’s character when he argues that Stephen, often “put forth by the massed proprietors of the Joyce Legend as an authentic genius,” “is a tedious cliché, weary, disdainful, sterile” (360). Stephen’s predicament throughout the novel is that while he challenges early twentieth-century Ireland’s hypocrisy, cowardice, and nationalist aims, he

contains the same attributes within himself. Young and insecure, Stephen is not a completely satirical, narcissistic character. He often recognizes his own shortcomings and engages in self-directed humour and irony. With this in mind, *Portrait* emphasizes the performative aspect of Stephen's artistry, as demonstrated in his constant fixation on language and acting. This chapter argues that while Stephen at first accepts the roles that others want him to perform—all related to the demands of hegemonic masculinity, homosociality, and patriarchy—he moves away from these performances only to perform a different narrative: the narrative of the artist-genius. Thus, Stephen's art, in its artifice, paradoxically allows him what he feels to be a more authentic mode of being.

Chapter two discusses Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and the seminal "angry young man," Jimmy Porter. Like his protagonist, Osborne performed the persona of the male artist-genius himself with his own capricious personality and politics. However, like Joyce with Stephen, Osborne is not uncritical of his "hero" despite elements of self-portraiture. Jimmy represents a type of post-WWII masculinity whose national identity is threatened with the unraveling of empire, notably with Indian independence in 1947 and the Suez Canal Crisis in 1956. Although Jimmy is arguably not an artist in a traditional sense, he often conceives of himself as an artist and undoubtedly possesses inclinations towards artistry. He demonstrates characteristics of the artist-genius, whether he is wilfully and self-consciously performing this role or not. At the same time, Jimmy is indeed an artist who creates works of art, composing the dialogue and songs for music hall song-and-dance routines which he performs in the rented room with Cliff. Although Jimmy is a frustrating character, his arrogant need to establish and maintain power stems from his insecurity and sense of rootlessness. Jimmy, often conceiving himself as a working-class rebel, actually holds quite traditional values and opinions, expressing nostalgia

and envy for the lost Edwardian age and its sense of stability and dignity, exemplified in the men of his father-in-law's generation.

Finally, chapter three turns to the late twentieth century with Kane's play, *Blasted* (1995) and the depraved tabloid reporter, Ian Jones. Kane's play emerged during a period of increased national pride, celebration of British culture, and economic certainty with 1990s' Cool Britannia, Britpop, the Young British Artists, and Tony Blair's New Labour. However, as Ken Urban discusses, "while Kane's work might have emerged during the time of 'Cool Britannia', it can be read as a riposte or counter to the dominant idea of 'coolness' which is highly individualistic and detached," with critics often adopting the term "Cruel Britannia" in referring to Kane's work ("Commentary" 77). As Urban contends, *Blasted* "grapples with key issues that were at the forefront in the 1990s, and in many ways remain in our global consciousness in this new century—issues such as war, masculinity and the possibility of ethics in the face of devastating violence" (84). Ian is defined by his misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia, which stem from his constant fear of the abject Other. Like Jimmy, he persistently tries to convince himself and others of his machismo by vilifying women and minorities, but his power is revealed to be an act by the end of the play. Ian's work as a tabloid journalist demonstrates Kane's condemnation of the popular culture and media of the 1990s: Ian writes sensationalized stories that eroticize sexual violence on women, stories he calls "personal" stories that people "[want] to hear" as opposed to foreign affairs and coverage on the war (Kane 49). Although Ian's character elicits disgust from the audience, he also elicits sympathy and pity, "reduced and humiliated as he is at the end of the play" (Armstrong 79). This chapter argues that Kane's ambiguous portrayal of Ian confronts the destructive and self-destructive consequences of toxic masculinity

played out to their logical ends, in a model of masculinity so bleak that it does not even find value in creating art.

The aim of this project is to present careful and thoughtful consideration of the position of the male artist character in twentieth-century British literature—research that interrogates predominant ways of thinking about this kind of character. What makes this project unique is the integration of contemporary gender theory with theorization on the nature and function of the artist. Following Butler’s theories, if gender identity is constructed in discourse, rhetoric, and linguistic signification, then it is especially important to look at language and literature as tools and artifacts for the study of gender performativity. As Stefan Horlacher argues, textual analyses can “allow us not only to identify the mechanisms of construction and transformations of masculinities within literary texts, understood as highly artificial, condensed, polysemous symbolic systems, but also to relate their ‘internal logic’ or mechanisms to both the literary system itself and the wider social and cultural context as well” (13). Moreover, as Peter F. Murphy emphasizes, if literature ““has played [a role] in reinforcing the assumptions about masculinity and, at times, [helped] to establish the norm of manhood,”” literature can also offer alternatives: ““other images, other roles, other options for men and masculinity”” (qtd. in Horlacher 4). Thus, literature serves a performative function, in that it can bring situations into being through language, “allowing for a variety of new male subject positions that become available through their very conception” (Horlacher 4). While cultural assumptions about gender affect performances, gender performances can also read and rewrite cultural assumptions.

## Chapter One: The Pre-Revolution Irish National Artist

In the final lines of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen Dedalus prepares to depart from his homeland to pursue his artistic vocation, rejecting his biological father, the fathers of the Church, and God the father to invoke his mythological artist-father, Daedalus (Joyce 224). Joyce scholars have theorized for decades on the question: is Stephen supposed to represent Icarus or Daedalus? That is to say, to what extent is Joyce presenting Stephen as an ironic Icarian character, unreasonably ambitious and inevitably doomed to fail in his pursuits, or as a Daedalian figure, successful in his dramatic escape from his island prison by way of creative genius? Indeed, many critics have referred to *Ulysses* as proof of Stephen's failed artistic project. Alan W. Friedman argues that in *Ulysses*, Stephen is "still proclaiming his independence and artishood, still creating nothing, still ensnared by the forces that begot, reared, and misshaped him" (59). Friedman's quote is compelling, as throughout *Portrait*, Stephen often thinks of his calling as an artist in similar sexual and familial terms of reproduction and legacy. "Metaphors of paternity, inheritance, privilege, and authority," such as Stephen's apparently prophetic name, are central to his self-conception as a man of exceptional creativity (Lawrence 383). Although Stephen claims to reject the restrictive, masculinist communities in which he grew up, he still identifies himself within the boundaries of patriarchal tradition that serve to assert and maintain hegemonic power. Stephen may not perform masculinity in the ways his classmates, his father, and his Jesuit teachers want him to, but he still claims masculine power and cultural superiority in his performance of authentic artistic genius, epitomized in his self-conscious performance of the archetypal artist's self-liberation.

As a *künstlerroman*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* tells the story of the growth of the artist: the "portrait" is not the finished work of art, but the act and process of its

completion. Stephen's supposed "genius" must be considered as a dynamic, social activity rather than, as Hugh Kenner suggests, a subject in "pictorial repose" (360). With its autobiographical elements, *Portrait* indicates Joyce's exploration and conceptualization of his own position as an artist, thereby demonstrating both a personal and cultural need for explicating what it means to be an artist, especially within a context of late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Irish national culture. Despite elements of self-portraiture, Joyce presents Stephen's story with irony, illustrating a self-conscious awareness of the affectation and artificiality that accompany notions of artistic genius while maintaining a sympathetic depiction of the young artist's desire for beauty and truth. In illuminating the contradictions that constitute Stephen's maturation, sense of authenticity and authority, and relationships to other people and society, Joyce reconsiders conventional *Bildung* narratives of the artist's self-determining isolation, exceptionalism, and individualism.

*Portrait* straddles the nineteenth-century realist style of *Dubliners* and the high-modernist, experimental style of what would become Joyce's *magnum opus*, *Ulysses*. Joyce employs the realist, *künstlerroman* form to establish the trajectory of Stephen's artistic vocation as mediated by definable social and institutional contexts, but he then combines this realist form with modernist experimentations—including techniques of intertextuality, free indirect speech, and stream of consciousness narration—to produce a remarkably naturalistic impression of the artist's interior journey and self-reflexivity. The disjunctive narrative form of *Portrait*, with its diversions, reiterations, contradictions, and afterthoughts upsetting the continuity of chronological development, reflects Stephen's emerging artistic consciousness, which is also demonstrated in the way the narrative prose grows more sophisticated as Stephen matures from baby talk in Part I to academic discourse in Part V. *Portrait*'s narrative form and style make

manifest the power language has in the formation, representation, and reception of individual and collective identities. Julia Kristeva saw Joyce as employing in his works the *jouissance* derived from *écriture féminine*, as his deconstruction of the realist form indicates gender play and a style of writing that uses abstraction, ambiguity, and contradiction to encourage a limitless play of signifiers, also reflected in *Portrait*'s content. As Hélène Cixous argues in "The Laugh of the Medusa," stream-of-consciousness and other forms of poetic writing work against the phallogocentrism of language: the closure and control of language, meaning, and desire that is inherently patriarchal. In short, Joyce employs in *Portrait* an *écriture féminine* that opens possibilities—that begins to break apart the rules of language, narrative, and Law—in a gesture that many postmodern feminist theorists have identified as deconstructing conventionally male forms of writing.

As a child, Stephen absorbs the language his male relatives use as entries into the Symbolic Order and the Name-of-the-Father. When his father and granduncle speak "of the subjects nearest to their hearts, of Irish politics, of Munster and of the legends of their own family," Stephen listens intently, studying for his impending role as mature adult man:

Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learnt them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world about them. The hour when he too would take part in the life of that world seemed drawing near and in secret he began to make ready for the great part which he felt awaited him the nature of which he only dimly apprehended. (Joyce 54)

As if he is preparing for some "great part" in a grand theatre production of "life" and the "world," Stephen's rehearsal of lines indicates that language and acting are integral to the socialization of the young boy into the world of Irish politics, national identity, and familial

tradition. R.B. Kershner notes the performative aspect of Stephen's occupation with language, observing that Stephen's mind "buzzes with borrowed expressions, languages which he tries on like suits of clothing" ("Artist as Text" 885). He identifies that Stephen "studies accents, vocabularies, intonation and delivery much like an actor unsure which of an infinity of possible parts he will be called upon to play" ("Artist as Text" 891). In other words, Stephen's preoccupation with language involves a rehearsal of that language in preparation for its reception by others: he seems to be aware that he is both reading a script and being read by it. The language Kershner uses to describe Stephen's words and phrases that he "tries on like suits of clothing" to allow for "an infinity of possible parts" is strikingly like the language Judith Butler uses in explicating gender performativity. Indeed, Stephen's improvisations can be characterized as performative actions designed to convey a truth of the self regardless of whether he learns them from others or makes them up on his own; thus, Stephen demonstrates awareness of the constructed nature of identities and the possibilities of subject positions with which to identify. However, while he sees the positive, generative potential of language in producing alternate subject positions, he also recognizes the discourse that is being enacted upon him, regulating his performance of identity within ideological, patriarchal constraints.

Although Joyce at times ironizes Stephen's artistic vocation and although Stephen at times engages in his own self-directed irony, Stephen still demonstrates genuine artistic sensibilities. Throughout the novel, he meditates on words, their meanings and their sounds, repeating "treasure[d]" phrases to himself as he "allow[s] them to glow and fade, hue after hue," contemplating their "harmon[ies]," "colours," "poise and balance," "rhythmic rise and fall," and "associations of legend" (Joyce 146). Language is intrinsic to Stephen's sense of his identity, as he writes down "himself, his name and where he was," situating himself within the larger

“Universe” (Joyce 13). As he melodramatically imagines his death and funeral while he is sick in the infirmary at Clongowes, young Stephen recites to himself the “song that Brigid had taught him,” wanting to “cry quietly but not for himself: for the words, so beautiful and sad, like music” (Joyce 21). Stephen embodies language and appropriates language. As a small child in the opening lines of the novel, he sings the song about “the wild rose blossoms,” and his lisping pronunciations make it “his song” (Joyce 5); as a university student preparing for his flight from Ireland, he humorously refers to Stephen’s Green, a public park in Dublin, “my green” (Joyce 220). In this manner, Stephen controls and takes over language as his medium in creating his truth; he makes language “his own” by imbuing it with expressive and semantic intention.

As Friedman aptly delineates, Stephen as an artistic child “comes to play numerous performative roles—storyteller, essayist, actor, singer, piano player—and often to the applause of schoolmates, teachers, priests, and family” (Joyce 56). Stephen seems to be at his most likeable and most comfortable when he is performing. Before his school’s Whitsuntide play, he does an “irreveren[t]” impression of the rector reciting the *Confiteor* to the delight of his classmates, who in the past had bullied him because he admires the “heretic” and “immoral” Lord Byron (Joyce 71). As Friedman argues, performances and the call for performances “can be aggressive, defensive, or an imposition, a way of precluding intimate conversation, of cultivating, forcing, or faking a communal circle, or of asserting power” (xviii). One of the few times Stephen feels whole-hearted happiness and genuine belonging is during his performance in the play: “Another nature seemed to have been lent him: the infection of the excitement and youth about him entered into and transformed his moody mistrustfulness. For one rare moment he seemed to be clothed in the real apparel of boyhood: and, as he stood in the wings among the other players, he shared the common mirth” (Joyce 74). In performance, Stephen feels included

in male homosocial bonding, as if he had borrowed an article of clothing that legitimated his belonging. The “real apparel of boyhood” emphasizes the imitative and superficial semiotic processes that are central to performative articulations of identity.

Stephen throughout his development is a romantic, imaginative child, concomitantly with a penchant for being theatrical. An attitude he consistently puts on that provides him pleasure and reassurance is the posture of being vulnerable yet proud, a particularly noble and manly position he has learned and adopted from the books he reads as a child. Admiring Alexandre Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*, he acts out adventures as the hero, Edmond Dantès, journeying towards an imagined Mercedes. When Stephen imagines finally reaching her as an older and wearier man, he expresses “with a sadly proud gesture of refusal”: ““Madam, I never eat muscatel grapes”” (Joyce 55). Playing with the neighbourhood boys, he takes on Napoleon’s airs by adopting the military leader’s clothing style: having read of “Napoleon’s plain style of dress,” Stephen “[chooses] to remain unadorned, thereby heighten[ing] for himself the pleasure of taking counsel with his lieutenant before giving orders” (Joyce 55). Moreover, when Stephen imagines his funeral when he is sick in the infirmary after Wells pushed him into the square ditch, he “takes unapologetically exaggerated pleasure in the sorrow of his classmates over his demise, and he caps it with a vindictive satisfaction at the idea that Wells will be ostracized” (Gillespie 73).

Undoubtedly the most serious and deliberate instance of Stephen putting on this disposition of being vulnerable yet proud is the scene following his meeting with the rector to contest his unjust pandying by Father Dolan. Imagining himself as one of the “great” people “in the books of history” whom “the senate and the Roman people” (his classmates) “declared...had been wrongly punished,” he aligns his Greek name to “the great men in history” while Father

Dolan's name is "like the name of a woman that washed clothes" (Joyce 48). After Stephen leaves the rector's office successful, with Father Conmee assuring Stephen that he will talk to Father Dolan, Stephen explicitly tells himself that he "would not be anyway proud with Father Dolan. He would be very quiet and obedient: and he wished he could do something kind for him to show him that he was not proud" (Joyce 51). Stephen's resolution is self-congratulatory and patronizing towards Father Dolan; he claims superiority over Dolan when he vows that he will practice the manly principles of reserve and clemency. However, Stephen's self-satisfied posture is ambivalent: despite winning the victory over Dolan and winning approval from his classmates, he still feels anxious and isolated as he squirms away from the boys who celebrate his triumph by carrying him in the air. The role of benevolent hero righting injustice for the collective good (putting the tyrannical Dolan in his place) causes anxiety in the young boy who is still unsure of the roles he is supposed to play within the homosocial environment of the school. The boys compel him to go to the rector, and as the deed proves successful, the praise from the boys provokes in Stephen an undercurrent of pain and a reminder of his isolation—"a leader afraid of his own authority, proud and sensitive and suspicious," as Stephen later broods (Joyce 79). His sense of self is further confused, and his manliness undermined, when he discovers that Father Conmee and Father Dolan, along with his own father Simon Dedalus, found young Stephen's trying ordeal to be especially laughable. Suzette A. Henke explains, "Stephen has unwittingly played the ingenuous fool at the court of his Jesuit masters and, in a bold attempt to assert his budding manhood, has merely served as a feminized object of wry patriarchal amusement" (58-9). Condescendingly, Simon exclaims, "*Manly little chap!*" to emphasize Stephen's unmanning (Joyce 63). Stephen's humiliation at the hands of his "fathers" assails his childlike innocence and sense of justice and plants the seed of his eventual distrust of patriarchal authority. This episode

does not deter Stephen from asserting his performative manliness but reinforces it, as he comes to adopt what he perceives to be a morally and intellectually superior manliness compared to that of the men who raised him. *Portrait* emphasizes the performative aspect of Stephen's developing artistry as providing him the potential for heroic agency to rise above his mediocre forefathers.

The male homosocial environment in which Stephen grows up is alienating for the sensitive and diffident young boy. On his trip to Cork with his father, Stephen is "humiliat[ed]" by his father's feminized sentimentality and nostalgia for his lost manly youth (Joyce 82); however, seeing the camaraderie between his father and his cronies causes pain in Stephen who had "known neither the pleasure of companionship with others nor the vigour of rude male health nor filial piety" (Joyce 84). Before performing in the Whitsuntide play, Stephen reflects on his relationships with his classmates, schoolmasters, and father:

He mistrusted the turbulence and doubted the sincerity of such comradeship which seemed to him a sorry anticipation of manhood. The question of honour here raised was, like all such questions, trivial to him. While his mind had been pursuing its intangible phantoms and turning in irresolution from such pursuit he had heard about him the constant voices of his father and of his masters, urging him to be a gentleman above all things and urging him to be a good catholic [sic] above all things. These voices had now come to be hollowsounding in his ears. (Joyce 73)

For Stephen, the roles and codes of masculine honor, filial duty, Catholic brotherhood, and gentlemanly comportment are inauthentic and thus meaningless. In an ironic twist, he will gain authenticity by turning towards the "phantasmal comrades" of art and away from the "profane world" and "worldly voice [that] would bid him raise up his father's fallen state by his labours and...the voice of his school comrades [that would urge] him to be a decent fellow" (Joyce 73).

Therefore, Stephen's alienation from other men for failing to perform "proper" manliness is at the centre of his psychomachia and compels him to self-consciously perform isolation as a brooding poet, an alternative version of manliness. As Ashley Elizabeth Savard aptly points out, "self-conscious performativity is taken for granted, sometimes even ignored, in favor of examining the mechanisms of control in place [within performativity]" (46). To examine Stephen's self-conscious performativity is to examine his conception of himself as "the only man...in this institution that has an individual mind," as Temple declares (Joyce 176). However, as this chapter will later address, this posture of individuality comes to border on cliché: Stephen's performance of his identity is self-conscious, but not necessarily "self-styled" (Savard 22). That is to say, while he actively participates in a construction of his identity, he does not exactly perform individuality, as he acts within the codes and expectations of male artistic genius.

Over the decades, many Joycean scholars have identified the gender and sexual anxieties and ambiguities prevalent in *Portrait* to better understand the tensions at play in Stephen's character. Often queer readings of *Portrait* argue that Stephen suffers from what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls "homosexual panic," "the obsessive impulse to ferret out and punish or suppress all manifestations of male homosexual desire in oneself and others," which is concurrent with homophobia, misogyny, compulsory heterosexuality, and gender policing (para. in Teal 64). Although Stephen's ambiguous sexuality has been the topic of much speculation over the years, the question of whether he is definitively queer or not is moot, but what is significant is how his performance of masculinity is part of his effort to secure heterosexuality which in turn influences his relationships with other people, his homeland, and his artistic vocation. As Joseph Valente explains, Joyce grew up during a time when a series of prominent homosexuality scandals, such

as the Cleveland Street scandal, fueled a perception of British masculinity in crisis, in which male homosexuality threatened “the racial or national whole and British leadership in the world” (*Quare Joyce* 6-7). In addition, Joyce can be seen to be engaging with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexology, as writers such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, John Addington Symonds, Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and Sigmund Freud helped to define homosexuality as an ontological condition, and one that indicated a supposed increased proclivity for the arts (Valente, *Quare Joyce* 12). The eccentricity or the “queerness” of the male artist was supposed to suggest homosexuality: as Lenehan comments in *Ulysses*, “There’s a touch of the artist about old Bloom.” Thus, the gender and sexual anxieties and ambiguities of Stephen’s character in *Portrait* indicate Joyce’s engagement with a contemporary fear and fascination with the figure of the male homosexual, as he explores a general atmosphere of homosexual panic and gendered ideas about artistic practice in early twentieth-century Irish and British society and culture.

Stephen’s homosexual panic is visible in his continual association of (homo)sexual excitement with abjection, manifested in images of dirty, standing water and excrement. His frequent meditations on cesspools, bogwater, and lavatories almost always accompany experiences of sexual tension and confusion. As the result of homosocial roughhousing, Stephen gets pushed into the square ditch (cesspool or urinal) which causes him to develop a fever (Joyce 12). He feels afraid and shivery when he hears about Simon Moonan and Tusker Boyle caught smuggling in the square, implying “[p]robably homosexual contact but possibly masturbation” (Joyce 37n4). Stephen thinks about Moonan and Boyle, the latter of whom is often called “Lady Boyle because he [is] always at his nails, paring them” (Joyce 37). Stephen wonders, “But why in the square? You went there when you wanted to do something. It was all

thick slabs of slate and water trickled all day out of tiny pinholes and there was a queer smell of stale water there” (Joyce 37). Hearing the boys will be disciplined by being struck on the bottom, Athy and Wells make lewd jokes, but Stephen fearfully imagines the physical pain and emotional humiliation of flogging: “It made him shivery: but that was because you always felt like a shiver when you let down your trousers. It was the same in the bath when you undressed yourself. He wondered who had to let them down, the master or the boy himself” (Joyce 39). Stephen’s consistent association of sexual tension, and especially homoerotic tension, with dirty water and bodily elimination indicates his implicit understanding of sexuality, the male body, and homosexual desire as abject and dirty, something to be “cast off.” Stephen imagines Mr. Gleeson’s “white fattish hands” and pared fingernails “like Lady Boyle” and “though he trembled with cold and fright to think of the cruel long nails and of the high whistling sound of the cane and of the chill you felt at the end of your shirt when you undressed yourself...he felt a feeling of queer quiet pleasure inside him to think of the white fattish hands, clean and strong and gentle” (Joyce 40). In line with psychoanalytic understandings of abjection, on the flip side of the dread of the abject is the desire for it.

Consequently, Stephen’s fear, disgust, and desire of the vulnerable body, inclusive of his own body, cause him to turn away from material, mortal reality to escape to the abstract realm of “impalpable, imperishable” art in similar fashion to his mistaken vocation for the Church (Joyce 149). As illuminated in the “*Foetus*” scene, Stephen views his sexual body as an “abase[ment]” of his “intellect” as “[t]he letters cut in the stained wood of the desk [stare] upon him, mocking his bodily weakness” (Joyce 79). Certainly, Stephen’s visceral and disturbed reaction to the word is the result of his Catholic upbringing and scrupulosity as it is a reminder of his whoremongering; however, the word is also a reminder of his mortality—as Temple states,

“Reproduction is the beginning of death” (Joyce 204). When Stephen later sees his classmates on the beach, their naked bodies mediate his epiphany:

The mere sight of that medley of wet nakedness chilled him to the bone. Their bodies, corpsewhite or suffused with a pallid golden light or rawly tanned by the sun, gleamed with the wet of the sea...The towels with which they smacked their bodies were heavy with cold seawater; and drenched with cold brine was their matted hair...It was a pain to see them, and a swordlike pain to see the signs of adolescence that made repellent their pitiable nakedness. Perhaps they had taken refuge in number and noise from the secret dread in their souls. But he, apart from them and in silence, remembered in what dread he stood of the mystery of his own body. (Joyce 147)

The phallic, penetrating, “swordlike” pain Stephen feels as he watches the boys’ wet, naked bodies makes him aware of the burdensome and shameful mortality and “mystery of his own body,” and it is directly after this scene that Stephen realizes his “mild proud sovereignty” and call to artistry (Joyce 148).

As the boys play with Stephen’s Greek name, Stephen thinks, “[n]ow, as never before, his strange name seemed to him a prophecy” (Joyce 148). The moment of his epiphany is described as “timeless” and “impersonal” as he imagines Daedalus rising and flying above the sea, “a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being” (Joyce 148). Stephen feels his body dematerialized: “His soul was soaring in an air beyond the world and the body he knew was purified in a breath and delivered of incertitude and made radiant and commingled with the element of the spirit” (Joyce 148). Stephen had felt a similar phenomenon after his performance in the Whitsuntide play, where he “saw the simple body before which he had acted magically deformed” (Joyce 75).

Thus, his artistic vocation represents the will to escape from the vulnerable male body to the abstract realm, characterized by the perfect, independent subject that creates “out of the freedom and power of his soul” (Joyce 149). For this reason, it is not the bird-girl who inspires Stephen’s epiphany as many often interpret the beach scene, but the swimming boys who inspire his flight from abjection. The bird-girl accordingly becomes the representation of Stephen’s movement towards the disembodied realm of aesthetics— “the vast indifferent dome”—and the idealized, abstracted, allegorical feminine (Joyce 151). This movement from male homosocial desire towards the idealized feminine is foretold in young Stephen’s search for his Mercedes, roaming his neighborhood and brooding that

[t]he noise of children at play annoyed him and their silly voices made him feel, even more keenly than he had felt at Clongowes, that he was different from others. He did not want to play. He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld. He did not know where to seek it or how but a premonition which led him on told him that this image would, without any overt act of his, encounter him... He would fade into something impalpable under her eyes and then in a moment, he would be transfigured. (Joyce 56)

Isolated from other children, Stephen, the young aesthete, takes solace in “an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose” (Joyce 146). He imagines the immaterial, abstract realm bestowing upon him the feminine image he sees in his soul, and in the encounter with this image, he is transformed into something immaterial as well. Thus, the passage where he imagines the encounter with Mercedes is a description of the artistic process as imagined by Stephen. With the realization of the work of art, gendered as feminine,

comes the “transfigur[ation]” of the artist where his divinity is revealed to his disciples, and his “[w]eakness and timidity and inexperience... fall from him in that magic moment” (Joyce 56).

On the beach, Stephen falls asleep and dreams of traversing the newfound world of the abstract, described with floral/vulvar imagery and orgasmic language: “Glimmering and trembling, trembling and unfolding, a breaking light, an opening flower” (Joyce 151). The abstract realm is described using language attributed to the feminine, along with Stephen’s soul which is also gendered feminine: “swooning,” passively falling and being embraced into the world of truth and beauty. Stephen thinks: “Where was his boyhood now? Where was the soul that had hung back from her destiny, to brood alone upon the shame of her wounds and in her house of squalor and subterfuge to queen it in faded cerements and in wreaths that withered at the touch?” (Joyce 149-50). Sheldon Brivic contends that Stephen as the male artist must assume femininity in order to be successful. This argument is consistent with a long historic association of aestheticism and artistry with effeminacy and homosexuality, especially following the Wilde trials (Dean 251). Notably, nineteenth-century writers such as Carpenter argued for the “inherent cultural superiority” of the homosexual man because of his “combination of masculine and feminine features” (Dean 252). However, while Stephen indeed demonstrates traditionally feminine traits throughout the novel, Brivic’s argument that “Stephen’s devotion to transformation and to the future means that he accepts the feminine within himself as his leading principle” is inaccurate (463).

Rather than a celebration of the male artist’s ability to embrace a more feminine state of mind as Brivic suggests, the character of Stephen illuminates the patriarchal constraints and power structures that are implicit within discourses of art-making and cultural elitism, in that they serve to ostracize women despite the fact that the language of male artistic genius

appropriates the language of femininity. As Andreas Huyssen argues, “the imaginary femininity of male authors, which often grounds their oppositional stance vis-à-vis bourgeois society, can easily go hand-in-hand with the exclusion of real women from the literary enterprise and with the misogyny of bourgeois patriarchy itself” (44). Stephen claims artmaking as a kind of male reproduction and labour, where “the male artist’s ability to create fictional characters out of his imagination is analogous to a woman’s ability to give birth to children out of her body” (Weir 208). As David Weir explains, this concept of “‘womb envy’ or patriarchal parturition” has a long cultural history, from Eve’s birth out of Adam’s body in Genesis to Carl Jung’s concepts of the anima and animus and the female fertilization of the male imagination (208). Stephen’s goal in his art is to “recreate life out of life” (Joyce 150); when he expounds his aesthetic philosophy to Lynch, he speaks of “artistic conception, artistic gestation and artistic reproduction” (Joyce 184). Stephen identifies male artistry and creativity with female reproduction and procreativity while reinforcing the male/mind female/body binary, privileging masculine intellectual creativity as loftier and superior because the male artist’s creations are immortal: “living thing[s], new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable” (Joyce 149). The only complete example of Stephen’s art to which the reader has access is the villanelle, which Stephen composes after what many have identified as a wet dream. With Stephen’s orgasm and ejaculation come “sweet music,” “morning inspiration,” and “seraphic” “ecstasy” that incite him to create his first work of art since resolving to become an artist (Joyce 191). He describes the creative process as passive inspiration as the artist wields privileged access to the divine, similar to Romantic interpretations of the role of the artist. Moreover, he describes the artistic process in terms of conception, specifically employing imagery of the Annunciation: “O! In the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh. Gabriel the seraph had come to the virgin’s chamber” (Joyce 191). The

villanelle becomes the offspring that the male artist's fertile mind has conceived and birthed, made literal by Stephen's ejaculation. It is important to note that Stephen produces this poem with Emma, "the temptress of his villanelle," in mind, imagining in an masturbatory fashion her "nakedness yield[ing] to him, radiant, warm, odorous and lavish-limbed" as the "liquid letters of speech... flowed forth over his brain" (Joyce 196). Thus, Stephen as feminized artist producing out of the womb of his mind still reinforces sexual power relations as Emma becomes, as Henke argues, "a disembodied muse, an *objet d'art* controlled by the male imagination...As seductress and autoerotic muse, she can be possessed in a moment of sublime ecstasy that offers both sensuous and imaginative gratification" (5). As a male artist, Stephen claims discursive mastery over the feminized realm of art as well as actual women in his life.

Henke argues that "[f]emale characters are present everywhere and nowhere in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. They pervade the novel, yet remain elusive. Their sensuous figures haunt the developing consciousness of Stephen Dedalus and provide a foil against which he defines himself as both man and artist" (50). Distinguishable female characters in *Portrait* include Stephen's mother, Mercedes, the prostitute, the Virgin Mary, Emma (E—C—), and the pregnant peasant woman of Davin's story: all of these women are abstracted into allegorical (or stereotypical) figures in the young, solipsistic artist's mind, and all provide a source of simultaneous attraction and fear for Stephen. The women of *Portrait* are "threatening or enchanting, seductive or aloof" and represent what Stephen as privileged male subject, as male author and male authority, wants them to represent as he projects his thoughts and desires onto them, containing them within the "spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus" of art (Henke 4; Joyce 223). As Henke argues, "[t]he shadowy Mercedes of *A Portrait* becomes the romantic object of Stephen's prepubescent fantasies, just as the Virgin Mary later appeals to his ascetic, monkish

mentality” (4). All things considered, Joyce undercuts Stephen’s imaginative control over women with irony, as Stephen’s pursuit of the female (both in his relationships and in his art) is excessive, exaggerated, and fetishistic. Certainly, *Portrait* depicts an immature child who is still learning and growing. However, while Stephen’s narrative control of women is the product of his puerile imagination, it also illuminates how the abstraction of womanhood is part of the young boy’s socialization into patriarchy. While Joyce may ironize Stephen’s potency, Stephen is not completely innocuous, evident in his continued childish treatment of women, in his reveries, in real life, and as a university man preparing to leave Ireland to pursue his artistic vocation. As the rest of this chapter will argue, Stephen employs the language of patriarchal power in articulating his artistic project: to recuperate the state of the feminized Irish nation through virile art despite his position as feminized colonial subject and aesthete.

According to Stephen, one of the most significant “nets” containing and controlling his artistic freedom is the early twentieth-century ethos of nationalist masculinity preceding the Irish Free State. Valente contextualizes the gender anxieties of the colonized Irish subject under English rule: with “the identification of the colonizer and the colonized with masculine and feminine principles respectively,” with Ireland being a “wife” or “sister” to England, “[t]he gender system acted as a uniquely serviceable frame of reference for discriminating the English from the Irish in a hierarchical manner in order to rationalize the English appropriation of Irish land and liberty, while at the same time acknowledging the profound cultural intimacy of the two peoples” (*Problem of Justice* 38-40). From the Irish perspective, militant resistance against English imperial control was “*not only* part of a rational if desperate revolutionary program but *also* a reaction, at least subconsciously, against their feminization by the British” (emphasis

original) (Valente, *Problem of Justice* 40).<sup>1</sup> As Valente argues, the political logic of rebellion as a reaction against feminization consequently produces “colonial hypermasculinity on internal relations and representations” which requires a dichotomous stereotype of Irish femininity as not only counterpoint, but also its “ideological telos” (*Problem of Justice* 40). In other words, Ireland became a personified woman to be protected by men—“a symbol of the quest for home rule,” a Kathleen ni Houlihan—which in turn also meant a self-identification with this woman, thus reinforcing the imperialist gender allegory of Ireland as feminized nation (Valente, *Problem of Justice* 41). In *Portrait*, this notion of female Ireland as counterpoint and ideological telos is manifested in Stephen whose wish to become “Ireland’s first authentically ‘modern artist’” produces a contradictory, in-between gender position (Teal 67). Laurie Teal argues, “On the one hand, Stephen—as male artist—wants to seduce Ireland and create an imaginary nation that validates both his sexuality and her own. On the other hand, Stephen wants to embody Ireland, to create and contain the new Ireland within himself” (67). So, as Michael Patrick Lapointe explains, “[t]he Irish male subject was divided through identifications with and interpellations by regulatory power in the discourses of abject femininity and so too with nationalisms’ virile masculinity” (165-6).

Stephen’s pursuit of becoming an artist, “forg[ing] in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce 224), is undeniably a vocation exclusive to men in Stephen’s contemporary time and place, as women had little privilege and access to the elitist realms of art and politics which sought to exclude them. The role of national artist allows Stephen to claim moral and intellectual superiority not only over other men, but especially over

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<sup>1</sup> However, in an “insoluble double bind,” the English regarded the “violent force” and “aggressive virility” of the Irish as still feminized—unstable and undependable—as imperialist discourses of manhood “legitimated [English] power and privilege by manipulating either side of a given, politically charged [gender] binarism to [English] advantage” (Valente, *Myth of Manliness* 10-11).

women and a feminized Ireland, which he calls “the old sow that eats her farrow,” the abject cannibal mother (Joyce 179). He emphasizes his will in instructing Ireland’s women, and while he uses the language of maternity, reproduction, and filial legacy—indicating the positive, generative power of matriarchy—he also uses the language of coercion and domination, asserting his power over women: “How could he hit their conscience or how cast his shadow over the imaginations of their daughters, before their squires begat upon them, that they might breed a race less ignoble than their own? And under the deepened dusk he felt the thoughts and desires of the race to which he belonged flitting like bats across the dark country lanes” (Joyce 210). It is notable that throughout the novel, Stephen expresses misogynist contempt for female characters by comparing them to bats: he thinks of the peasant woman of Davin’s story as “a type of her race and of his own, a batlike soul,” and he similarly thinks with “bitter[ness]” that Emma is “a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul” (Joyce 160, 194). While the “bat-like” women represent abject traitors, “calling the stranger to her bed” or flirting with Father Moran, Stephen also aligns the race, the country, and himself with these same feminized bats “waking to the consciousness of [themselves] in darkness and secrecy and loneliness” (Joyce 160). Stephen characterizes femininity as part of the collective malaise that consumes Ireland, but he also gestures at a revolution to come with the image of awakening. He leads the way, “fly[ing] by those nets” of “nationality, language, and religion” (Joyce 176).

Stephen’s confrontations with Irish national identity are fraught with anxiety and ambivalence, from his childhood memories of Charles Parnell’s death and the infamous Christmas dinner scene to his attempt to “liberate himself from the heavy burden of a nationalist movement that self-consciously aims not for revolutionary rupture but for a renaissance—a ‘rebirth’ of lost cultural values” (Boes 776). Irish nationalism for Stephen is tied up not only with

ideals of Irish manliness, but also the performance of “traditional” Irish national identity. He hears voices from his father, masters, and peers “urging him to be strong and manly and healthy,” and “when the movement towards national revival had begun to be felt in the college,” they bid him to “be true to his country and help to raise up her language and tradition” (Joyce 73). With this in mind, the concept of performativity is especially useful in looking at the boys’ discussions of nationalism in Part V of *Portrait*, because the novel’s direct engagement with the Home Rule movement presents the inextricable connection between Irish nationalism and ideals of heteronormative, virile masculinity. Cultural and gender performativity are concurrent within the novel’s early twentieth-century Irish nationalist context, as “successful” performances of both Irishness and Irish manliness rely on performances of specific cultural citations that produce the appearance of permanent and authentic Irish, masculine identity.

Cultural performativity and gender performativity are not completely analogous concepts, as culture in its diversity does not operate within a binary division as the system of heteronormative gender does. However, a notion of cultural binarism is indeed communicated in *Portrait*, namely in the binary of English versus Irish that Davin upholds. Davin’s criticism of Stephen is that Stephen fails to perform “Irishness” in the young Fenian’s conception of the word: Stephen does not sign McCann’s petition for disarmament and universal peace, will not take Irish language classes, “talk[s] against English literature” but then “talk[s] against the Irish informers” (Joyce 177). When Davin claims himself to be an “Irish nationalist, first and foremost” and calls Stephen a “born sneerer,” Stephen responds sarcastically by recommending Davin “make the next rebellion with hurleysticks,” “[t]he bladed sticks used in the traditional Irish game of hurling” (Joyce 177, 177n7). Stephen’s scorn for what he sees as impotent nationalist crusades that emphasize a return to old Irish traditions leads Davin to

question if Stephen, ““with [his] name and [his] ideas,”” is ““Irish at all”” (Joyce 177). As Savard contends, Davin does not actually care about Stephen’s Irish birth and does not need to see Stephen’s family tree as Stephen offers (16). Rather, Davin’s accusation is that Stephen needs to prove and authenticate his Irishness by performing what Davin believes to be the expectations and norms of being Irish and subsequently become ““one of [them]”” (Joyce 177). Moreover, Davin suggests that for Stephen to prove he is Irish, he must also prove that he is not English, ““a conviction that Stephen’s actions must fit neatly into a category without contradiction””—similar to how to be a man is to be not-woman (Savard 26). Davin repeats to Stephen, ““Try to be one of us...In your heart you are an Irishman but your pride is too powerful”” (Joyce 178). Davin’s claim that nationality is natural, inherent, stable, and therefore authentic—in one’s “heart”—refuses Stephen’s agency in cultural identification at the same time Davin recognizes Stephen’s self-conscious performance against Irish nationalism: Stephen’s “pride” compels him not to submit. Davin seems very aware of the performative aspect of nationality, as his appeal to Stephen to become Irish reveals culture as a process of self-creation within historical and social conventions.

Yet despite Davin’s apparent acknowledgement of the constructed nature of nationality, Stephen’s failure to perform Irishness “correctly” or “successfully” according to cultural expectations and social pressures results in his ostracization as someone who does not fit into narrow definitions of being a dutiful, honorable, stalwart Irishman. Therefore, Stephen finds himself subject to accusations of being selfish, impotent, and affected. His unusual, un-traditional, and un-Irish name—as peers point out continually throughout the novel—leads Stephen to see his name as prophetic and inspires him to leave the island prison of Ireland. His Latinate name, a fiction created by Joyce, makes manifest the constitutive role of names as

signifiers in shaping identity; as David W. Robinson argues, “[o]ne of Joyce’s goals in *A Portrait* is to expose the structure of personality as a dialectic between internal and external determinants, where fixity and fate both are illusory” (325). However, Stephen Dedalus’s name is also Joyce’s gesture towards a cultural identity that transcends national boundaries: Joyce indicates a common stock of culture from the Greeks down to the present, reflected in both Stephen and Joyce’s departure from Ireland to pursue their art and implied furthermore with the Homeric structure that Joyce employs in *Ulysses*.

Not only does Davin view being a good Irishman as being explicitly not-English, but he also suggests that nationalist projects and art are antithetical as well. As Stephen expounds on the “slow and dark birth” of the soul that is “more mysterious than the birth of the body” and the “nets” that are “flung at [the soul] to hold it back from flight,” Davin replies, “Too deep for me, Stevie... But a man’s country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie. You can be a poet or a mystic after” (Joyce 179). MacCann and MacAlister express the same sentiment with derision: MacCann calls Stephen a “[m]inor poet” who believes he is “above such trivial questions as the question of universal peace,” and MacAlister accuses Stephen of “[i]ntellectual crankery” which “is better out of this movement than in it” (Joyce 174-5). Stephen’s classmates rebuke his posture as a detached aesthete rejecting his moral obligations, and Stephen indeed agrees with the boys’ allegations that his art and his country are mutually incompatible, “taking pleasure in provoking his friends’ repeated charges that recapitulate his aloofness from them and all others” (Friedman 72). Within the dichotomy of art versus nation, Stephen prioritizes art and refuses to get entangled in the boys’ form of revolution and rebellion. However, that is not to say that he does not hold nationalist views or rejects identification with his home country altogether:

he defines his political stance to his classmates, arguing that efforts at Irish independence have both betrayed the Irish people and been betrayed by the Irish people.

While critics have made valid arguments that Stephen's narcissistic and solipsistic tendencies establish a character who is self-aggrandizing, the claim that Stephen "disallows any kind of apprenticeship to an authority other than himself (or 'literature' in the abstract)" is too reductive and does not take into consideration Stephen's persistent dependence on the collective influences of family, nation, and religion, especially in his art (Castle 174). Stephen tells Davin, "This race and this country and this life produced me...I shall express myself as I am" (Joyce 178). Later, Cranly comments to Stephen: "It is a curious thing, do you know... how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve" (Joyce 212). In the penultimate line of the novel, Stephen proclaims, "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce 224). Even while leaving the country he sees as an obstacle to his artistic vocation, he feels responsibility as an artist to use his creative talents to redeem his fellow Irishmen, perhaps signalling his wish to one day return to Ireland. Stephen's calling as an artist requires that he integrate himself back into society through the completion and realisation of his art.

Although Stephen is isolated, he has a desire to belong to a community and a tradition of other exiled artists. His self-imposed exile repeats a narrative he has learned from other exiled figures of rebellion, energy, creativity, and determination: he conceives of himself as embodying Byron's "heresy" and Satan's *non serviam* in his "revolt" (Joyce 217-9). Of course, Stephen's exile is not an exile in the proper understanding of the term—that is, forced departure from one's homeland—as his is voluntary like that of Joyce's own mythologized retreat to the continent. Savard contextualizes Joyce's willful departure from Ireland as "[t]he necessity of experiencing

exile in order to undergo an ‘estrangement from oneself’ [which] has long been seen as symptomatic of the modernist movement” (60). As Savard argues, Joyce’s conscious decision to use the word “exile” to describe his emigration manufactures the perception that he “transcended a stifling literary tradition in Ireland by escaping into exile” and “modernized himself by instead choosing to become a citizen of the world” (81). Stephen, like Joyce, must leave Ireland to successfully revive the stagnant state of Irish art; he is aware of “the pride of his spirit which...always [makes] him conceive himself as a being apart in every order” (Joyce 141). Stephen’s exile is yet another example of his posture of being vulnerable yet proud. A voice in his “lonely heart” tells him, “Away then: it is time to go,” to which he silently responds, “Yes; he would go. He would not strive against another. He knew his part” (Joyce 216). The artist’s performative exile reinforces the myth of “the isolated and rejected genius abandoned by an uncaring world” and in turn, the myth reinforces the need for the artist’s exile (Savard 83).

When Stephen defines his aesthetics to Lynch, he emphasizes that aloofness and impersonality are central to his conception of what the artist and his art should be. Stephen’s aesthetic theory is comparable to the aestheticism and decadence of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde and the doctrine of “art for art’s sake” which affirms that art needs no exterior moral justification or social purpose and that the assertion itself has moral and social force. Stephen asserts that the artist is a godlike, intelligent designer, and he employs the God as watchmaker analogy to the detached artist and invokes notions of the homosexual and feminized aesthete: “The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (Joyce 189). But despite Stephen’s assertion of the impersonality of the modern aesthete, he does not seem to follow his own prescriptions. The villanelle he writes following this conversation with Lynch is

quite histrionic; Kenner calls the piece “an exceedingly conventional poem in the idiom of the empurpled nineties, and indeed a poem Wilde might well have admired, one which seems unlikely to pass beyond the nineties” (360). Notably, Kenner’s assessment of the poem suggests that Stephen’s poetry is too feminine. In addition, Stephen does not give the villanelle to Emma for fear that she, her brothers, her uncle, and “paramour” Father Moran will ridicule it (Joyce 196). Thus, Stephen tries to perform a disaffected, masculine coolness in his art and in his interactions with others, but that performance is consistently unconvincing. However, Stephen as feminized aesthete still asserts masculine power in his capacity for passionate feeling and creative force. With the completion of the villanelle, he re-masculinizes the traditionally feminine trait of vulnerability into a form of virile resistance against Emma’s “dark shame of womanhood”: “pit[iable]”, “humiliat[ed]”, and “frail” (Joyce 196). Correspondingly, Stephen’s conception of the impersonal artist re-masculinizes passivity and withdrawal (““silence, exile and cunning””) as restraint, patience, and modesty (Joyce 218). Therefore, within a patriarchal framework, Stephen as privileged male subject, as the natural and industrious male artist, can claim and perform a position of power.

Friedman writes that “[a]ll his life Stephen has felt himself beset by insistent voices (and ‘calls,’ appeals, and summonses) that challenge and prescribe roles for him, voices that become increasingly strident and ‘hollowsounding’ as the book progresses” (65). As this chapter propounds, these roles are all related to the reinforcement of male homosociality, hegemonic masculinity, and patriarchal power. By the end of the novel, it is still unclear whether Stephen’s skill with manipulating discourse is “sufficient to outweigh his manifest manipulation by [it]” (Robinson 334). To conclude by revisiting the question proposed at the beginning of this chapter—is Stephen supposed to represent Icarus or Daedalus?—the answer may be “a little bit

of both,” as mediocrity and heroism need not be mutually exclusive traits. Joyce presents an exceptionally realistic character in how he shows his protagonist navigating his way within and beyond entrenched, exclusionary cultural norms in an attempt to ““discover the mode of life or of art whereby [his] spirit could express itself in unfettered freedom”” (Joyce 217). As the rather optimistic ending to the *künstlerroman* indicates, Joyce identifies through Stephen the artificial and discursive nature of identity that signals agency despite a person’s subjection to cultural ideologies—though in a limited way in Stephen’s case, with his desire for destiny and narrative structure in the myth of male artistic genius. The ending emphasizes the artist’s individuality and demonstrates the early twentieth-century faith in the myth of the heroically alienated, masculine artist: Stephen escapes the nationalist ideologies of the Fenian Brotherhood to perform alternative masculinity and reformulate masculinity in artmaking. However, while his flight indicates growth, expansion, and rising, it is also a reminder of his position as Daedalus’s son, Icarus.<sup>2</sup> His heroic journey is undercut with the penultimate diary entry which begins, “Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order,” demonstrating the ironic self-awareness that remains at the end of the novel (Joyce 224). As *Portrait* and this first chapter have established the role of language, will, and performance in creating identity, the following two chapters turn to how the notion of masculine artistic genius can manifest in more visibly harmful and limiting ways with an examination of Jimmy in John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and Ian in Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) and what it means, apparently, to be a British national artist post-Empire.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the swimming boys makes this point explicit by yelling out during Stephen’s epiphany on the beach, “O Cripes, I’m drowned!” (Joyce 148).

## Chapter Two: The Post-WWII Angry Young Man

While John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* received largely negative reviews when it premiered in 1956, Kenneth Tynan's glowing review in *The Observer* helped to launch it into enormous critical success and cemented its legacy as a culturally important play for British theatre. His review praised *Look Back* for presenting "post-war youth as it really is, with special emphasis on the non-U intelligentsia who live in bed-sitters...All the qualities are there, qualities one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage—the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, [and] the automatic rejection of 'official' attitudes" (repr. in Taylor 50). While *Portrait* deals with Stephen negotiating feelings of powerlessness as a colonial subject under the British Empire, *Look Back* stages Jimmy Porter, a scholarship boy in the Midlands, negotiating feelings of impotency with the profound change in masculine prestige and power following the demise of the Empire during the mid-century. Tynan's reading of the play was highly influential because it reflected a cultural need for young men of the postwar generation to see in Jimmy a character who conceptualized their feelings of rootlessness and insecurity in the modern world. *Look Back* demonstrates in Jimmy the new vista of possibilities marked by experimentation with identity as he concurrently embodies the disquieting fears that accompany the loss of secure traditional social categories. Although Jimmy is a representative of a 1950s context, he is also a recurring type across British literature and society, a "Hamlet"-like hero as Tynan argues: a sensitive, disillusioned young man with a penchant for "parody," "candour," and "soliloquy" (49). Jimmy's language is highly performative, but the play's characters as well as audiences are compelled to admit that there is something honest and authentic about it. However, despite whatever potency Jimmy may have to draw others to him, he remains an impotent and pitiful individual. While Osborne presents a realistic and multifaceted character that has an

autobiographical likeness to himself, and while many young men identified with Jimmy's anger, Osborne self-reflexively undercuts Jimmy's virility in depicting an unpleasant, ineffectual young man who is unable to sufficiently cope with and adapt to the period in which he finds himself.

An uncritical idealization of Jimmy's character has sinister implications; as Aleks Sierz writes, the "most insidious trap" for a play such as *Look Back* is that it can attract young men who, instead of being challenged on their anger, are able to congratulate themselves ("Myth of Anger" 145). Audiences cannot always take Jimmy's words at face value, and it is more difficult from today's perspective to see Jimmy, with his self-indulgent and abusive misogyny, as a hero. The opening stage directions and description of Jimmy establish him as a contradictory character, and Osborne in fact presents him in largely negative terms:

*He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal. (Osborne 5-6)*

Osborne directly and implicitly critiques his protagonist, while also being sensitive to his plight. He encourages audiences to see beyond Jimmy's statements and habits to see what they really stand for, to identify the emotions and pressures operating within the character's psyche.

At the same time, Jimmy's views must be conceivable for the play to be taken seriously. The central tension of Jimmy's character is his criticism of society's lack of enthusiasm and energy while lodged in his chair looking for a concert on the radio. As Mary McCarthy writes, Jimmy's "boredom is a badge of freedom, and he will not be passive about it; for him, boredom

is a positive activity, a proclamation. To be actively, angrily, militantly bored is one of the few forms of protest open to him that do not compromise his independence and honesty” (151-2). Jimmy argues, “Why *don't* we brawl? It's the only thing left I'm any good at” (Osborne 50). He has no plans to do anything constructive about the impotency he sees in English society, including himself, as he places emphasis on feeling and caring rather than acting on beliefs and convictions (Quigley 42). As Austin E. Quigley argues, “Jimmy's inability to do anything about the problems that concern him diminishes but does not destroy the credibility of his judgments and the persuasiveness of his enthusiasms” (42). Instead, Jimmy's character dramatizes the issues the play confronts at the individual level rather than provides solutions. His speeches are both “idiosyncratically excessive and generally revealing”: he functions in the play “not by being balanced, authoritative, and right, but by raising in inflammatory ways questions that remain troubling even when the idiosyncrasy [sic] of their formulation has been acknowledged” (Quigley 41). This sense of truthfulness is what draws audiences and other characters to Jimmy even when they find him objectionable; his anger does not occur in a vacuum but indicates a national unease.

Although *Look Back* does not explicitly reference any contemporary political events, it alludes to the political, social, and cultural zeitgeist of 1950s Britain in portraying the anxieties and hopes surrounding the wane of the British Empire. The audience learns that Alison's family returned to England in 1947 from India where Alison's father was stationed, referencing the increasing number of independence movements in colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean during the 40s and 50s, including Indian Independence in 1947 (Brook 7). The play takes place in the “present”—the “present” being 1956 when the play premiered, a year of political upheaval in the form of the Hungarian Uprising, the Suez Canal Crisis, the campaign against capital

punishment, and the rise of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (Dyson 22). Thus, Jimmy's claim that there are no more "good, brave causes left" to fight for cannot be taken seriously (Osborne 83). The international humiliation of Britain during the Suez Canal Crisis especially diminished Britain's place as central global power as the conflict was resolved by ascending geopolitical powers including the United States; Jimmy comments, "it's pretty dreary living in the American Age" (Osborne 13). The mid-50s also marked a decade after World War II and the establishment of the welfare state, and the play assesses the extent to which parliamentary promises to care for underprivileged citizens have come to fruition. In making his protagonist a scholarship boy from a working-class background, Osborne refers to the Education Act of 1944 which sought to extend higher education to lower social orders. Britain's socialist-inspired policies served to produce a postwar meritocracy to counter the old aristocracy; however, many members of the new upwardly mobile, educated elite found that this new elitism was "no more palatable than the old" (Denison xiv). Osborne dramatizes in Jimmy the in-between state that characterized postwar English society: straddling elitism and egalitarianism, and tradition and modernity. Jimmy is similar to *Portrait's* Stephen navigating his intermediate position in pre-independence Ireland: they both depend on and refer back to tradition while championing novelty and change; are devoted to their homelands as they criticize national impotency; and envision a more democratic and egalitarian society through cultural elitism.

Jimmy is, as John Russell Taylor argues, an "enormous cultural snob," engaged with how national character is expressed in literature as he constantly makes references to British writers and their works (77). Jimmy criticizes J.B. Priestley for being nostalgic, "well-fed," and "comfortable" like Alison's father (Osborne 12), and he mocks William Wordsworth for being remote, effeminate, and bourgeois: "I may write a book about us all... Written in flames a mile

high. And it won't be recollected in tranquility either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth" (Osborne 51). He decides that the name he and Cliff have chosen for their comedy duo—"Jock and Day," a punning reference to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*—is "too intellectual," but the alternative name he proposes is also highbrow: "T.S. Eliot and Pam" (Osborne 78). He suggests that he is the only one who has the energy to read Priestley, insists on purchasing "posh papers" despite his meager funds, is offended by the creased state of Cliff's trousers, and refuses to see a picture at the cinema because the "Sunday night jobs in the front row" will ruin it (Osborne 9-12). Osborne grants Jimmy the power to "redefine aesthetic and cultural values, at least within the world of [the play]" (Brook 75), but Jimmy, despite what he may claim, is not quite artist, not quite working class, not quite anti-Establishment, and not quite rebellious youth. Rather, he represents a new cultural elite of the late 50s, as intellectuals of the British New Left saw culture rather than politics as the "means both of understanding and transforming contemporary society" (Brook 17). Jimmy's conception of culture is consistent with the New Left's lament for cultural decline. Although he is certainly frustrated with the English class system, his anger is more directed at the upper classes' aloofness rather than their social privilege (Worth 104; Brook 50). Not only this, but even more frightening, issues of "intellectual inertia" seem to prevail across class, "affecting the common Cliff as much as the well-bred Alison" (Worth 104). Therefore, while Jimmy presents a social critique, his critique is not meant to encourage a more equal and democratic society but instead to reinforce the notion of a "sensitive minority" comprised of people like himself who keep alive cultural values that are "under threat from superficial, inauthentic people" like his wife, her family, and their friends (Brook 50).

Jimmy mocks English artists like Priestley and Wordsworth, but he admires Ralph Vaughan Williams because his music is “strong,” “simple,” and “English”—a judgement that Jimmy self-consciously recognizes as unduly “patriotic” (Osborne 13). Whereas the common perception is that a person like Jimmy—a vaguely rebellious, youthful artist figure—is supposed to be cosmopolitan, Jimmy actually feels quite attached to English culture. While he derides hallmarks of the conservative English Establishment, from the class system and public schools to English politicians and clergymen, he argues that foreign cultures threaten to eliminate English national identity: “we get our cooking from Paris (that’s a laugh), our politics from Moscow, and our morals from Port Said” (Osborne 13). Alison recounts to Helena that Jimmy was outraged when Hugh left England to go abroad to work on his novel: Hugh had decided that “England was finished” and the “only real hope was to get out, and try somewhere else,” and Jimmy had “accused Hugh of giving up” (Osborne 43). With Jimmy’s inability to grapple with the loss of English power—a sentiment he shares with his father-in-law—he looks back at the “imperialistic grandeur” of Colonel Redfern’s generation with “dubious nostalgia” (Gilleman, “The Logic of Anger” 73-4). He appreciates the stability of the Edwardian age, while admitting that his picture is “romantic,” “phoney,” and “sentimental” (Osborne 13). He likes Redfern “because he can feel sorry for [him]”; thus, he appreciates that the Colonel is likewise a victim of the rapidly changing political, social and cultural landscape, a recognition of victimhood that Redfern reciprocates in expressing, albeit hesitantly, admiration and respect for Jimmy (Osborne 65).

Jimmy’s sympathy for individuals like Redfern indicates a complicated and contradictory relationship with issues of imperialism, class consciousness, tradition, and nationhood. His criticism of Helena and “her kind” can be read as a criticism directed towards himself: “They’re a romantic lot. They spend their time mostly looking forward to the past” (Osborne 54). His

inconsistent voice of “outraged youth,” “semi-skeptical modern nostalgia,” and “imperious Victorian expectation” is representative of an intergenerational position (Quigley 49).

Furthermore, Jimmy’s pretensions are closely linked to the class consciousness that has pervaded in British society, in that his crisis of masculine identity also reflects a crisis of class identity. As a scholarship boy from a working-class background, one who attended a “not even red brick, but white tile” university (Osborne 40), Jimmy embodies the feelings of rootlessness and anxiety that Richard Hoggart outlines in his partly autobiographical book, *The Uses of Literacy*. Yet, unlike Hoggart who as a working-class scholarship boy found success within cultural industry, Jimmy represents a departure from this image. Existing within a liminal state between his working-class background and the middle-class opportunities that have opened up to him, Jimmy is characterized by hindered self-confidence and drive, and inertia in terms of social standing and personal relationships. Jimmy’s often-misdirected anger expresses the “conflict between acceptance of the necessity for change and intolerance of its implications” (Quigley 47).

For Jimmy, Englishness is supposed to be a virile, masculine, heterosexual culture. In contrast, non-English culture for Jimmy is always homosexual—Jimmy cites French writer André Gide, Italian artist Michelangelo Buonarroti, and the Greek Chorus boys (Osborne 32-3). As Praseeda Gopinath explains, in both England and abroad, the popular imagination connects traits of Englishness with traits of bourgeois gentlemanliness: “the stiff upper lip, restraint, decency, love for tradition married to a love of liberalism, common sense, steadfastness, and plain speaking” (7). In *Look Back*, Colonel Redfern is the classic model of the nineteenth-century gentleman whose masculine traits legitimized English imperialism and racial superiority: “a large handsome man,” a former soldier “[b]rought up to command respect” but who is still an “essentially gentle, kindly man” (Osborne 61). Redfern is described as “often slightly withdrawn

*and uneasy now that he finds himself in a world where his authority has lately become less and less unquestionable,*” as he represents outmoded values in a period of major transition (Osborne 61). In contrast to Redfern, Jimmy is by no means an English gentleman with a “stiff upper lip,”<sup>3</sup> but he still believes in an ideal of forceful, heterosexual Englishness. Jimmy demonstrates a shift in the ideals of what constitutes virile English masculinity, as masculinity comes to look less like a stoic military officer and more like a passionate intellectual. Gopinath attributes this shift to “the pressures of imperial decline, the rise of welfare state governmental practices, and the insular turn as an imperial nation attempts to assert its post-imperial, postwar identity” (13). Jimmy as “post-gentleman,” to use Gopinath’s term, is metonymically linked to the postwar nation as he is “simultaneously conservative and iconoclastic; (post)imperial and national; melancholy and confident; old and new” (11). The “Janus-faced” post-gentleman is “conservative in terms of gender and sexual politics, as the new man emerges through an exclusionary assertion of a heteronormative/homosocial masculinity”; yet he is “ostensibly progressive in his class politics, because national masculinity expands to include the ordinary EveryEnglishman” (11).

Moreover, the masculinity of the mid-century that Gopinath describes is one that re-masculinizes feeling. Critics have considered Jimmy’s emotional character as emulating an American version of 50s masculinity that emphasizes “sexual unease” and “raw intensity,” citing James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) (Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 47; Demastes 61). While this may be true—Jimmy is in a literal sense a “rebel without a cause” and makes direct reference to Brando in *Streetcar*

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<sup>3</sup> “I hope you won’t make the mistake of thinking for one moment that I am a gentleman,” Jimmy tells Helena. “I’ve no public-school scruples about hitting girls” (Osborne 55).

(Osborne 81)—Osborne also frequently argued that the emotional reserve of the British was a myth, referring to the candidness of ““ordinary”” people in particular (Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 47). Many British reviewers of the 50s found Jimmy’s outbursts too emotional and too lower class, arguing that Jimmy was not masculine enough and needed discipline to toughen him up and cure his sissyness (Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 47). Jimmy himself admits that he can be “like an [sic] hysterical girl” (Osborne 57). What these critics identify, and what Jimmy himself outlines, is the impotency of his speeches, which he attributes to the defects of a modern world that abounds with apathy and insincerity.

In postwar England, men expressing emotion becomes a radical and revolutionary act—not only in the sense that it can be a means for change, but also in the sense that it conveys difference and separation from the status quo. In *Look Back in Anger*, the predominant emotion that the male hero expresses is of course anger, an emotion often associated with machismo. As Luc Gilleman explains, “[f]or Osborne, anger is the courage of weakness. Turning out well-honed yet sharply abrasive phrases became his way of constructing masculinity, a condition that is supposed to be natural but that in Osborne is always problematic” (*Vituperative Artist* 20). The ostensible naturalness and authenticity of anger masks gendered ideologies and structures of power. Sierz points out that in a culture that frowned upon expressions of feeling, “anger signified behaving badly, scandal, foreignness, threat: in a word, otherness. As English culture’s repressed Other, anger was seen as provincial rather than metropolitan, rough rather than well-spoken, predatory rather than safe—and dissatisfied rather than complacent” (“Myth of Anger” 140). Thus, Jimmy, the seminal Angry Young Man, positions himself as an oppressed countercultural figure as justification for oppressing others. He represents simultaneously the dominated and dominator, but the other characters see through the bravura of this position.

Helena and Alison are especially well-positioned to point out Jimmy's self-indulgence in that they are profoundly more marginalized as women, and especially by Jimmy himself. "You think the world's treated you pretty badly, don't you?" Helena asks Jimmy, to which Alison replies, "Oh, don't try and take his suffering away from him—he'd be lost without it" (Osborne 52). Jimmy may be a "rotten sadist," as Cliff proposes, but Jimmy is a masochist as well (Osborne 16). The feeling male as aesthetic construction and performative stance relies on a binary system of gender norms and expectations in which men adopt a "subject position traditionally associated with femininity—victimization, powerlessness, passivity—" to indicate their "authenticity and capacity to feel" (Brook 74). Jimmy embodies various inconsistent traits that can be manipulated for either side of the gender binary to suit the politicized narrative of his victimization but also active subjectivity. Despite being a "*disconcerting mixture*" of masculine and feminine traits, Jimmy reinforces sexual difference in which he relies on a dichotomous opposition of unfeeling womanhood in establishing himself as morally superior, feeling male (Osborne 5). A reversal of dominant gender dichotomies of male/female, strong/weak occurs in *Look Back* in order to paradoxically reinforce the same dichotomies, as what is often perceived as weak (i.e. Jimmy's outbursts) is established as strong, and what is often perceived as strong (i.e. Alison's steadfastness) is established as weak.

Jimmy expresses his authenticity by using the robust, muscular male body and macho physical strength as metaphors for emotional and spiritual strength. Comparing himself to Miss Drury's reverend friend, Jimmy argues that the "spiritual beefcake" reverend's religious teachings ("moral weight-lifting") could not make him more of a man, because he is already the manliest in his capacity for strong feeling that is unhindered by convention (Osborne 77). He argues for his superior—i.e. more masculine—moral and spiritual state compared to the

reverend's excessive, unattractive, "over-developed" morality (Osborne 77). Moreover, Jimmy pits his enviable, "superb" spiritual "physique" against his former, also unattractive and unmanly "skinny weakling self" who was "too afraid to strip down to [his] soul," and against the female film starlet who only feigns strong feeling (Osborne 77). Within the play, church officials are corrupt and hypocritical: *Look Back* opens with Jimmy's rebuke of the Bishop of Bromley for using religion to argue for the manufacture of nuclear weapons and blaming the working classes for fostering the idea of class distinctions (Osborne 9). Jimmy argues for his manlier brand of authentic, creative, and democratic feeling above duplicitous, over-moralizing, and self-righteous organized religion.

Several contemporary reviews expressed that *Look Back* was "virile" and celebrated the play's masculine sexual aggression, as critical discussions centered on the growing "obsequiousness" of men "[w]eaned by the Welfare State" and the "British male's nagging fears of his own futility" (qtd. in Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 46). *Look Back* ushered in the style and genre of kitchen sink realism and the Angry Young Man play in the effort to re-masculinize British theatre against the "homosexual sensibility" and effeminate, decadent modernism that was perceived to have dominated post-war theatre, with gay writers like Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan having prominent roles (Brook 71-2). According to Dan Rebellato, *Look Back*'s "new emphasis on realism, feeling, identity, and honesty replaced a previous theatrical culture of subversion, destabilization, and camp" (para. in Brook 71-2). Kitchen sink realism and the naturalistic anger of the Angry Young Man provided an "empiricist, lower-middle-class English aesthetic rebellion against the exclusionary tactics and non-Englishness of Modernism as perpetuated by the upper-class elite" (Gopinath 120). With concerns surrounding the decline of English imperial power and the state of "native" English culture, writers such as

Osborne turned to realism because it was a style perceived to be authentic, masculine, autonomous, and thus “quintessentially English” (Gopinath 120-1). However, despite a movement towards a more heterosexual, masculine British theatre that emphasizes authenticity and clarity, realist plays such as *Look Back* are complicated by the fundamentally exaggerated, metaphorical, and performative nature of art and theatre. Moreover, Angry Young Man plays such as *Look Back* construct an exaggerated and romanticized image of homosocial, working-class manliness, further complicating the homosexual panic implicit in the effort to butch up English theatre and to uphold an image of the manly, heterosexual artist.

Artistic genius for Jimmy represents manly thrust and vigor, which are doubly manifested in an aesthetics of anger. Jimmy exaggerates his position as a pitiful, isolated artist amid philistines, yet there seems to be some truth to this posture, as the other characters recognize. Alison comments to her father, “perhaps [Jimmy] should have been another Shelley, and can’t understand now why I’m not another Mary, and you’re not William Godwin. He thinks he’s got a sort of genius for love and friendship,” to which her father responds, “Your husband has taught you a great deal, whether you realize it or not” (Osborne 65). Furthermore, as Gillemann comments, Alison, “of all people,” instructs Helena in “the official Byronic image of her Jimmy, the wild and sad outsider, burning vitalistic and deeply despairing” (“The Logic of Anger” 82). As Alison recounts her first impression of Jimmy, she describes him as a fiery force of destruction, full of uncontainable, intense, and palpable energy: “Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head, and his eyes were so blue and full of the sun. He looked so young and frail, in spite of the tired line of his mouth” (Osborne 42). While his boyish body is immature and vulnerable, his face communicates world-weariness and knowledge. Alison and Helena view Jimmy as an anachronistic individual.

Helena declares that Jimmy's problem is that he "was born out of his time" and "thinks he's still in the middle of the French Revolution"; in similar fashion, Alison calls him an "Eminent Victorian" (Osborne 88-9). According to the play's characters, there is no place for a passionate revolutionary in modern Britain, and Jimmy's knowledge of his own futility is both tragic and noble. He is a long-haired rebel riding not a white, but an "off white" charger, as Jimmy himself states (Osborne 49). However, as Alison points out, Jimmy is also "[s]lightly comic" in his anachronistic character and inability to adjust to the world in which he finds himself (Osborne 89). What is also "[s]lightly comic" is the way that this discussion of Jimmy being "not of his time" seems to repeat itself over and over—"We seem to have had this conversation before," says Alison—so that it reaches the point of sounding stale and cliché (Osborne 89).

Characters often repeat that Jimmy speaks a different language than everyone else, communicating his exceptionalism and artistic sensibility. Colonel Redfern observes, "[s]imply, and without malice," Jimmy's idiosyncratic "turn of phrase" (Osborne 65). However, while Jimmy's language sounds honest and colloquial, it is theatrical and pretentious and requires careful crafting of phrases and employment of rhetorical techniques such as hyperbole and metaphor. As Gilleman argues, "[v]ituperative sentences such as 'she's as rough as a night in a Bombay brothel, and as tough as a matelot's arm' ('arse,' as the uncensored text read) require assonance, alliteration, and a solid dose of perverse imagery" (*Vituperative Artist* 22). Sierz contends that Jimmy's diatribes, "[u]ndergraduate in style, aggressively witty, [and] revelling in their wordiness, repetition and exaggeration," represent a "fiction of the authentic spoken vernacular" when in actuality "no one in real life speaks like Jimmy does" ("Myth of Anger" 137-8). As the stage directions indicate, Jimmy's speeches are "*carefully rehearsed attacks*" that surprise no one (Osborne 19). Nevertheless, although the play ironizes the performativity of

Jimmy's speeches to reveal their constructed nature, it still idealizes Jimmy as an authentic, eloquent artist. Much of the play's admiring audience, as well as the playwright himself, wanted to see themselves as a "Jimmy": a fervent and vocal rebel who was not complacent but full of energy ("Myth of Anger" 138). Like Stephen of *Portrait*, Jimmy's character is marked by a disposition for theatricality and performance while maintaining a stance of honesty. As Jimmy's pronouncements are artistically constructed, "they are both real and unreal, deeply truthful because inspired, yet also false because endowed with a measure of poetic license" (Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 8). As an impassioned artist, he is continually making rousing public speeches within the private space of the rented room. His rantings are theatrical, and much of his raving is insincere, petty, or irrelevant, as he talks just to hear himself talk. Like the characters of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, Jimmy's speeches appear to be strategies for staving off obscurity. Helena comments to Cliff, "I never used to be sure when [Jimmy] was being serious, or when he wasn't," to which Cliff replies, "Don't think he knows himself half the time. When in doubt, just mark it down as an insult" (Osborne 76). The other characters are aware of Jimmy's prejudices and hypocrisies; his goal is not to be didactic but to rouse emotion and gain reaction, similar to Osborne's goal with his own art (Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 22). As Quigley argues, Jimmy's "impossible demands are uttered with the self-deprecating irony of someone who recognizes that his determination to define himself as a lost cause is both a contemporary indulgence and a historical necessity" (49). It does not matter what Jimmy cares about: what matters is simply that he cares.

The characters often use metaphors of war to express not only Jimmy's heroic bravado, but also his vulnerability. Alison describes Jimmy and Hugh's "brilliant campaign" against the upper classes in which they invaded Alison's family friends' parties, "raid[ing]" and

“plundering” “the enemy” and using her as “hostage” (Osborne 41). She characterizes Hugh as the more “ruthless” of the two, as Hugh rigorously devotes himself to performing the role of “barbarian invader” to the point that he is inclined to dress for the part, in “furs, spiked helmet, [and] sword” (Osborne 41). This dress is associated with a variety of warrior cultures across centuries, and the resulting image of Hugh in costume indicates his sentimental identification with the generic, manly warrior type. Alison describes Jimmy as going “into battle with his axe swinging round his head—frail, and so full of fire...The old story of the knight in shining armour—except that his armour didn’t really shine very much” (Osborne 43). Consequently, the distinction between Jimmy and Hugh’s authentic political response and performative assault breaks down. Of course, their “guerilla warfare” is an exaggeration, as gate-crashing the house parties of the wealthy and eating their food, drinking their alcohol, and smoking their cigars can hardly be called revolutionary (Osborne 42). Jimmy and Hugh are more parasites and hooligans than proponents of social justice working to remedy class inequalities.

At the same time, the metaphors of war are effective in that they convey the wounding of the sensitive male body as a resource to be expended in the name of the nation. Jimmy describes himself as victimized in his war against social ills, a “victorious general” in the arms of a loving woman as he is “heartily sick of the whole campaign, tired out, hungry and dry” (Osborne 84). He undoubtedly invokes this image of the wounded veteran from childhood memories of his father’s slow death and his mother’s irritation, embarrassment, and pity for her infirm husband. Jimmy establishes himself in the same position as his Spanish Civil War veteran father, but he expands the image to include a picture of the empathetic and responsive female partner that his mother failed to be for his father. Jimmy witnessing his father’s demise as a ten-year-old is a traumatic memory that has shaped his worldview—his politics and his prejudices—as an adult.

Jimmy's father was a Byron-like figure, sacrificing his life to fight for "good, brave causes," for another country's freedom. Having fought for the "wrong"—i.e. defeated—side of the Spanish Civil War, his father's "idealistic efforts were greeted not with gratitude, but with doubt and suspicion," especially from his hypocritical wife who was only interested in associating with "fashionable" causes (Quigley 45; Osborne 55). As William W. Demastes points out, Jimmy and Osborne are denouncing a phenomenon apparent during the mid-century and one that is still evident today: "the bandwagon desire to be politically fashionable by supporting causes that require little real commitment and demand little if any real risk" (65). Arguably, Jimmy's own political inaction is the result of witnessing his father's death as a young boy, as he has observed on a personal level the enormous individual costs of radical social intervention that go unrewarded and unrecognized. As Sierz contends, the play "pits the ideal of commitment—which assumes society can be changed by doing something—against the feeling of disillusionment, which provides an alibi for doing nothing" ("Myth of Anger" 139). Furthermore, Jimmy's bitter, misogynist accusations that women are unfeeling likely stem from watching his mother's emasculation of his father. He repeats that he was "the only one who cared" about his father as he emphasizes the physical and emotional vulnerability of the two feeling males who only have each other: one a grown, "feverish failure of a man" reduced to a helpless child and the other a "lonely, bewildered little boy" forced to grow up too quickly (Osborne 56). In adult Jimmy's words, ten-year-old Jimmy became a "veteran" after twelve months of feeling "angry and helpless" by his father's bedside, no longer a "virgin" as he comes into knowledge of "love," "betrayal," and "death" (Osborne 56).

According to Jimmy, women are society's biggest culprits of apathy and insincerity, specifically Alison and Helena, who are his most available and accessible targets as

representatives of both womanhood and the effeminate upper classes. One of his most significant denigrations of Alison is that she is a “monument to non-attachment”: “sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous” (Osborne 17-8). When Alison leaves Jimmy, he casts her letter as a “polite, emotional mess” and as “phoney” as a line from one of Helena’s plays (Osborne 71). “Stop breathing your female wisdom all over me,” Jimmy commands Helena when she tells him Alison is pregnant; he tells her he does not care that Alison is having a baby as he expresses anguish for Alison’s seeming indifference to Mrs. Tanner’s death. He ends his rant by announcing, “Well, the performance is over. Now leave me alone, and *get out*, you evil-minded little virgin,” marking the third time Jimmy correlates virginity to inexperience with strong feeling (Osborne 72). However, despite speaking of an overall weakness of women, Jimmy also describes an aggressive, feminine violence that offends his sensibilities and puts him in the position of victim as women try to “cash in” on his “defenseless chivalry” (Osborne 55). Jimmy criticizes Alison, then extends his attack to all women:

The way she jumps on the bed, as if she were stamping on someone’s face, and draws the curtains back with a great clatter, in that casually destructive way of hers. It’s like someone launching a battleship. Have you ever noticed how noisy women are?...The way they kick the floor about, simply walking over it? Or have you watched them sitting at their dressing tables, dropping their weapons and banging down their bits of boxes and brushes and lipsticks? (Osborne 20)

Jimmy lists how women besiege him in domestic spaces as he compares Alison to the women who were his former upstairs neighbours: dropping their makeup and hair tools, “[s]lamming their doors, stamping their high heels, banging their irons and saucepans” (Osborne 21). The “weaponry” that women use and the “assault” that they launch all pertain to femininity and

domesticity as Jimmy condemns the day-to-day “violence” he calls the “eternal flaming racket of the female” (Osborne 21). The irony should not be lost on audiences, as while Jimmy loudly complains about women’s self-absorption and noisiness, he epitomizes both. One can imagine that his former neighbours doing their makeup in the bathroom cannot compare to the “eternal flaming racket” of Jimmy screaming obscenities up the stairs at them, insults that he considers in a self-congratulatory fashion, “the most ingenious...[he] could think of” (Osborne 21).

To complicate Jimmy’s misogyny further, he resents the little power that Alison wields in her silence. According to Osborne and the play’s characters, Alison exerts power over Jimmy with her withdrawal. The fact that her power comes from passivity is doubly offensive for Jimmy who despises the lack of passion and enthusiasm in others, especially women. Osborne “claimed to have created the role of Alison as ‘a study of the tyranny of negation,’” as “‘Alison’s brutal power lay in the puny crackle of her iron,’” again describing a domestic, feminine violence (Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 57). Alison communicates this sentiment when she tells Cliff that despite understanding “just what [Jimmy] meant” when he spoke about their fleeting youth, she “pretended not to be listening—because [she] knew that would hurt him” (Osborne 24). Cliff also suggests that the antagonism between husband and wife is mutual: “I’m wondering how much longer I can go on watching you two tearing the insides out of each other” (Osborne 25). Having recounted his father’s death and garnering no response, Jimmy’s “*axe-swinging bravado...vanish[es], and his voice crumples in disabled rage*” as he rants: “I rage, and shout my head off, and everyone thinks ‘poor chap!’ or ‘what an objectionable young man!’ But that girl there can twist your arm off with her silence” (Osborne 56-7). Thus, Jimmy’s alleged victimization at the hands of his simultaneously dominating and submissive wife indicates a

misogyny that is rooted in a concurrent fear and desire for women, specifically as mother figures that threaten and reinforce the male subject.

While Jimmy expresses his world-weariness as being old before his time, he is also childish and immature, manifested in his diminutive name, his frequent temper tantrums, his amusement with stuffed animals and games, and his occupation as sweet-stall clerk. Jimmy craves a mother figure, exemplified in his attachment to older women such as Mrs. Tanner—“Hugh’s mum,” as Jimmy often calls her—or Madeline, his ex-girlfriend who is “old enough to be his mother” (Osborne 69). Jimmy cheekily refers to oedipal desire with the title of his song, “My mother’s in the madhouse—that’s why I’m in love with you” (Osborne 77); he is attracted to “*matriarchal*” Helena, as they passionately kiss after a disciplinary slap from her reduces him to a whimpering child (Osborne 36, 72). Alison’s comment to Helena that Jimmy wants from them “a kind of cross between a mother and a Greek courtesan, a henchwoman, a mixture of Cleopatra and Boswell” indicates a man who demands full attention and gratitude from women (Osborne 90). According to M.D. Faber, Jimmy’s ambivalent sexual attitudes are based in “the overriding traumas of his childhood,” in which he is afraid of separation from the mother and the nourishment she is supposed to provide (74-5).

Jimmy craves nourishment in a world that will not grant him the nourishment he seeks. He is always hungry and voracious, literally and metaphorically: he “burn[s] everything up” (Osborne 8). Faber interprets the character of Jimmy as an orally-fixated individual, manifested in Jimmy’s constant eating, drinking, smoking, trumpet playing, as well as his predilection for oral aggression and sarcasm (70).<sup>4</sup> While Jimmy is thin and hungry, “satiated” people both fascinate and anger him; Jimmy often refers to individuals of the upper classes as “well-fed,”

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, these activities are also activities that establish a posture of confident masculinity.

“over-fed,” or “flabby” (Faber 77). Jimmy also associates sex with food, as he argues to Cliff that being with a different woman is like having a different meal; his conception of love and sex is a devouring love that threatens to subsume its object (Osborne 81). While Jimmy is defined by his devouring, he also expresses his misogyny as a fear of being devoured by women, specifically Alison, who represents a cannibal mother figure, as per Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. In describing their lovemaking, Jimmy alleges that Alison “has the passion of a python”:

She just devours me whole every time, as if I were some over-large rabbit. That’s me. That bulge around her navel—if you’re wondering what it is—it’s me. Me, buried alive down there, and going mad, smothered in that peaceful looking coil. Not a sound, not a flicker from her—she doesn’t even rumble a little. You’d think that this indigestible mess would stir up some kind of tremor in these distended, overfed tripe but not her! ... She’ll go on sleeping and devouring until there’s nothing left of me. (Osborne 34-5)

Jimmy’s dehumanizing portrayal of Alison as a python slowly digesting her prey suggests she lacks sexual desire as she is unfeeling, inert, and silent, but also suggests she is overly sexual, devouring, absorbing, and annihilating her male partner. Jimmy repeats “me” several times, indicating a fear of the cannibal mother who threatens to erase his identity. There is dramatic irony in the image of Jimmy being the “bulge around her navel,” as it evokes Alison’s pregnancy and further reinforces the argument that he is more like Alison’s child than her husband.

Jimmy employs imagery of messy stickiness, including that of bodily fluid and food, to describe women as abject, biologically vulnerable beings, devouring and being devoured. Warning Cliff that he will end up a woman if he is too quick to please, Jimmy professes, “*savouring every word*” and purposefully misplacing the sentence modifier, “You’ll end up like

one of those chocolate meringues my wife is so fond of...Sweet and sticky on the outside, and sink your teeth in it...inside, all white, messy and disgusting” (Osborne 47). In addition, Jimmy crudely says that the worms that will eat his mother-in-law when she is dead will need laxatives in order to digest her (Osborne 51). For Jimmy, when women are not being devoured themselves, they are butchers, bloodsuckers, and eviscerating surgeons, depleting life out of men, although the stage directions repeat time and again that he is constantly trying to “*draw blood*” from others (Osborne 17). He calls Alison a “butcher,” comparing her to a “dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle,” the racist remark reminding the audience of the Suez defeat as Jimmy vents his anger onto more and more diffuse subjects (Osborne 20). His notorious no “good, brave causes” speech is sandwiched between imagery of women’s butchery of men, and thus he makes a direct connection between abject women and the loss of male potency. Addressing Cliff, Jimmy raves: “Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death? Have you ever had a letter, and on it is franked ‘Please Give Your Blood Generously’? Well, the Postmaster-General does that, on behalf of all the women of the world...No, there’s nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women” (Osborne 83).

Significantly, in Act Three Scene One, Jimmy discusses a news report of witches in the Midlands killing and drinking the blood of white cockerels as sacrifices to the Coptic Goddess of fertility and says that Alison’s mother must also be involved in witchcraft, sticking pins into an effigy of him (Osborne 74). “You never dabbled in this kind of thing, did you?” Jimmy asks Helena. “Sounds rather your cup of tea—cup of blood, I should say” (Osborne 74). Jimmy uses the story as a launching point for another misogynist attack on upper-class women— “well-known debutante[s],” Miss Drury, Helena, his mother-in-law, and really all women as he calls them witches and demands Helena declare her allegiances to him. The story of the witches is

noteworthy as their “grotesque and evil” practices in sacrificing “cocks”—an obvious pun—in the name of fertility suggests the loss of the phallus and the irrelevancy of men for procreation, also emphasized by Helena’s interest in artificial insemination (Osborne 73-5). Moreover, the Coptic Goddess, as another reference to England’s humiliation in Egypt, reflects a national castration and emasculation of the manly English on the world stage. Jimmy fears his sense of self being incorporated and annihilated by women and feminized Others, indicating a larger crisis of masculinity and masculine national identity. He writes a poem called “The Cess Pool,” explaining that he is “a stone dropped in it,” and suggesting that he feels surrounded by the abject while he is also part of the cast-off (Osborne 48).

Jimmy repeatedly expresses that what he wants more than anything is “enthusiasm” and “life.” “Let’s pretend that we’re human beings, and that we’re actually alive,” says Jimmy. “What do you say? Let’s pretend we’re human...it’s such a long time since I was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything” (Osborne 11). He complains that “[n]obody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm” (Osborne 13). There are exceptions such as Madeline who simply “delight[s]” in “being awake, and watching,” Mrs. Tanner who gets a “kick” out of “everything,” and Jimmy himself, as they comprise a minority of sensitive people (Osborne 15, 61). In his search for enthusiasm, Jimmy often looks towards and appropriates the cultures of disenfranchised groups, specifically the cultures of African Americans, the gay community, and the working class. This posture is unexpected since Jimmy tends to express disdain for groups more vulnerable than he is, namely women. To illustrate, Jimmy’s trumpet playing and reverence for jazz music is comparable to the American beat poets who appropriated signs of blackness and black culture as a means of accessing authentic feeling and claiming community (Brook 9). Jimmy asserts, “Anyone who doesn’t like real jazz, hasn’t any feeling

either for music or people” (Osborne 46). In primitivist fashion, he suggests that the black gospel singer is representative of “ordinary human enthusiasm” that affirms life and vitality: “I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! (*He bangs his breast theatrically.*) Hallelujah! I’m alive!” (Osborne 11).

Furthermore, Jimmy expresses the notion of homosexual men being more authentic and having more enthusiasm than the masses. “Sometimes I almost envy old Gide and the Greek Chorus boys,” Jimmy states. “Oh, I’m not saying that it mustn’t be hell for them a lot of the time. But, at least, they do seem to have a cause—not a particularly good one, it’s true. But plenty of them do seem to have a revolutionary fire about them, which is more than you can say for the rest of us” (Osborne 32). Jimmy appreciates that homosexual men have a commitment to the political cause of gay rights. He claims authenticity for Gide, Michelangelo, and the Greek Chorus boys as homosexual men, and specifically as homosexual artists. As Jimmy and Alison discuss Alison’s gay friend Webster, Alison recounts that Jimmy has called Webster “the only person who [speaks his] language,” to which Jimmy responds,

JIMMY. So he is. Different dialect but same language. I like him. He’s got bite, edge, drive—

ALISON. Enthusiasm.

JIMMY. You’ve got it. When he comes here, I begin to feel exhilarated. (Osborne 14) Jimmy states that Webster is a “sort of female Emily Brontë,” an irreverent way of referring to the writer as a masculine woman while calling Webster a feminine man, though he expresses this without hostility (Osborne 15). For Jimmy, Webster is admirable because he conveys a mix of masculine and feminine traits: “He’s not only got guts, but sensitivity as well. That’s about the rarest combination I can think of” (Osborne 15). While Jimmy criticizes the typecasting of gay

men as “clown[s]” or “tragic hero[es],” he glamorizes them as victims and rebels in a society that persecutes them (Osborne 33). As Brook states, “If masculinity is asserted as feeling and as woundedness, then the homosexual, through his feminized and wounded status, becomes the most masculine of men” (66). In one of his songs, Jimmy sings, “I’m tired of being hetero,” again expressing his contempt for women and envy for gay men, although the sincerity of this claim is doubtful (Osborne 47). He expresses homosexuality as a countercultural position: as a refusal to be straight, have children, and conform to heteronormative ideals. Certainly, Jimmy makes homophobic statements: he says that gay men find him suspect because of his seeming indifference to their sexuality which they “thrust” in his face (“as if [he] give[s] a damn which way [they like their] meat served up”); he does not consider gay rights as one of the “good, brave causes” he seeks; he suggests that homosexuality is a form of misogyny and a solution for not dealing with women; and he admits that gay men will likely want to persecute him for his remarks (Osborne 32-3). However, Jimmy has an unusually sympathetic attitude towards gay men considering his virulent personality: “his attitude to homosexuals is, by the standards of the 1950s, an odd mix of tolerance and provocation” (Sierz, *Look Back* 41). Like Webster, Jimmy has his own “strawberry mark,” his own affliction, that he “thrust[s]” in others’ faces, wanting to provoke and expecting people to be “interest[ed]” or “horrif[ied]” (Osborne 33).

Perhaps most significantly, Jimmy turns to working-class culture and working-class masculinity to find the enthusiasm and authenticity he craves. The working class has long been associated with honesty, integrity, and hard work in contrast to the decadence, passivity, and remoteness of the upper classes, a notion that the New Left especially espoused in their writings. Patriarchal gender politics are central to this conception of class difference, especially within the context of *Look Back*, as Jimmy aligns the honest working class with virile masculinity and the

inauthentic upper classes with decadent femininity. For Jimmy, Nigel symbolizes the upper-class, public school-manufactured intellectuals who are stuck in abstract language and removed from “knowledge of life and ordinary human beings” (Osborne 16). Of course, the irony is that Jimmy embodies much of the behavior of which he accuses Nigel. Jimmy is vague in his speech, all talk and no action, and elitist—not of class, but of feeling. Jimmy gets along with Cliff because he is “[c]ommon as dirt,” and he likes Mrs. Tanner “principally because she’s been poor almost all her life, and she’s frankly ignorant” (Osborne 27, 44). Alison tells her father that Mrs. Tanner is “ordinary. What Jimmy insists on calling working class. A Charwoman who married an actor, worked hard all her life, and spent most of it struggling to support her husband and her son” (Osborne 62). *Look Back* references a common conception of the working class as forceful and energetic, representing “the vanguard for social change...as the class that embodie[s] the desire for solidarity” (Brook 16).

Jimmy’s allegiance to his working-class background is exemplified in his profession as a sweet-stall vendor, despite being a university-educated man. Colonel Redfern expresses his confusion for Jimmy’s line of work, and Alison, “[*n*]o longer interested in this problem,” reveals that Jimmy runs a sweet-stall not because he cannot do anything else; rather, he has tried his hand at occupations such as those in journalism and advertising but has intentionally chosen this career and is content with it (Osborne 62-3). Thus, the play suggests that the sweet-stall is another manifestation of Jimmy performatively taking a rebellious stance, as he refuses to put his university degree to use and chooses to work in a low-wage, “pink collar,” service industry profession. For reasons of resistance and self-preservation, Jimmy has no desire to join the middle classes. The sweet-stall is also significant in that Mrs. Tanner purchased it for him and Alison, indicating Jimmy’s loyalty to her and his working-class kin. But neither Jimmy nor Mrs.

Tanner can technically be called working-class as they have both risen in social station: he is a university-educated scholarship boy who married an upper-class woman, and she is a business-owner who has risen in rank as the result of what Jimmy identifies as the merits of her hard work.

Moreover, Jimmy's music hall song-and-dance routines explore an "institution whose authenticity draws upon a long established [sic] tradition of 'common folk'" (Denison xiv). Osborne has his protagonist engage in what he nostalgically idealizes as a quintessential part of English culture, as Jimmy's Flanagan and Allen-style routines reference the iconography of working-class identity and represent a tradition of English vitality that Osborne saw as regrettably on the decline. In his preface for his 1957 play, *The Entertainer*, Osborne writes: "The music-hall is dying, and, with it, a significant part of England. Some of the heart of England has gone: something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art" (qtd. in Taylor 86). In *Look Back*, Osborne uses Jimmy's intense personality and interest in music hall entertainment to invoke a tradition of "rowdy passion" and "English irreverence" that was established "in the drama and poetry of medieval England and has persisted ever since" (Quigley 57). The inspiration for Jimmy's song lyrics come directly from his life and his rantings: "So avoid that old python coil / And pass me the celibate oil" or "Don't be afraid to sleep with your sweetheart, / Just because she's better than you" (Osborne 48, 80). Jimmy takes his angry tirades as pure, passionate, and autonomous set-pieces and composes comedic songs out of them. The democratic and accessible nature of the music hall represents for Jimmy, and Osborne, authenticity as opposed to the artificiality of modern life, but the art form in its very nature is based in performance, play, exaggeration, and excess. Jimmy often breaks into his music hall routines to diffuse tense situations.

Akin to the elation that characterizes the often-spontaneous music hall scenes, Jimmy and Alison turn to performance and enthusiasm at the end of *Look Back*, resorting to “a sort of ebullience of spirit associated with a child’s reckless abandon to play” with their game of bears and squirrels (Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 10). With the disjunctive ending, *Look Back* shifts from angry social realism to a scene where estranged husband and wife revert to their faux-naïf, romantic, and fantastical game where they become an anthropomorphized bear and squirrel couple who snuggle, sing songs, and take care of each other. With their “youth...slipping away” and their struggles to remember “what it was to feel young, really young” (Osborne 11, 24), Alison explains to Helena that the appeal of the game is that the stuffed woodland animals that stand in for the couple are “all love, and no brains”: “Full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other. Playful, careless creatures in their own cosy zoo for two” (Osborne 45). The game signals an attempt to evade the troublesome adult world of thought and discourse in favour of the world of candid feeling which is accomplished by play and performance—as Alison states, a “silly symphony for people who [cannot] bear the pain of being human beings any longer” (Osborne 45). The enthusiasm of the game is not all mindless frivolity and ignorance but has “an existential quality, based on experience and choice, and touched by despair and tragedy” (Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 10). A series of reversals occurs with the game. Jimmy and Alison paradoxically express honest emotion through acting and accomplish “humanity”—something that Jimmy requests of his friends throughout *Look Back*—through animal play and the “zoo” and “menagerie” of domestic life that Alison and Helena once condemned (Osborne 22, 44). While Jimmy once violently rebuked people who were “pusillanimous” and “timid of mind,” he concedes that he and Alison are “very timid little animals” (Osborne 18, 95).

The metaphor of Jimmy as bear is significant as it appropriately describes the masculinity that Jimmy embodies, and the fact that the play ends with this image indicates the re-masculinization of the feeling male. As Jimmy's alter-ego, the bear represents the strong, powerful, solitary outsider at the same time the "tattered" plush bear illustrates softness, brokenness, and childlike dependence (Osborne 5). Jimmy confides to Alison:

Was I really wrong to believe that there's a—a kind of—burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself? The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest. Like the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There's no warm pack, no herd to comfort him. That voice that cries out doesn't *have* to be a weakling's, does it? (Osborne 93)

Although Jimmy is voicing his self-doubts, the questions he poses are rhetorical, as the answer that the end of the play offers is that strong feeling and "cr[ying] out" indeed demonstrate "virility of mind and spirit." In the same speech, Jimmy states that he craves "relaxation of spirit," and it was what drew him to Alison when he first met her, but he differentiates the relaxation that comes from indifference (of which he accuses Alison) to argue for a relaxation that comes from "brawny" "strength" and "sweat[ing one's] guts out" (Osborne 93). Jimmy's conception of love is similar, in which he argues that love "takes muscle and guts," "dirtying up [one's] hands," and "messing up [one's] nice, clean soul" (Osborne 92). He uses language associated with working-class manliness to convey that love and "relaxation of spirit" require physical and emotional strength, exertion, and sacrifice. Thus, power is re-asserted for the "soft, scruffy sort of bear," and the play closes on a self-consciously "[p]athetic" and "comic" tone with husband and wife embracing and Alison whispering: "Poor bears! Oh poor, poor bears!" (Osborne 95).

The end of the play indicates a movement forward for the couple through a movement backward, a retreat. The ending of the play has encountered much opposition from critics across the decades for being too sentimental: Tynan criticizes the “painful whimsey of the final reconciliation scene” (qtd. in Taylor 50), while Faber argues that the reconciliation suggests a “neurotic union” and a “sick foreboding” (Faber 76). The ending is both excessively optimistic and bleak, as the reconciliation between husband and wife is based in suffering: Alison must experience intense pain and display strong emotion for reconciliation with Jimmy to happen. Jimmy’s horrible wish comes true as Alison suffers a miscarriage and returns to him, admitting that he was right about everything (Osborne 94). Critic Walter Kerr expressed astonishment for the play’s representation of Jimmy’s “irresistible masculine force”: ““you are asked to believe ... that two women not only love this volcano of random, ceaseless, spluttering venom but that the more abused of them, will, literally, crawl on her knees and elbows to beg him back. You believe it. The truth about this conscienceless sadist is that he is absolutely alive” (qtd. in Gilleman, *Vituperative Artist* 46). Alison and Helena recognize Jimmy’s pitifulness, and perhaps it is why they are attracted to him, viewing him as an honest but futile artist. The hopeful tone at the end of the play is undeniable despite the perverse reinforcement of power relations in the marriage: Jimmy does not “splash about in [Alison’s tears]” like he once said he would but tells her that they will take care of each other as “rather mad, slightly satanic, and very timid little animals” against the “cruel steel traps” of the world (Osborne 57, 95). The self-conscious, “*mocking, tender irony*” of the ending indicates a tone of both anxiety and hope for the domestic situation and by parallel, the larger political, cultural, and social context (Osborne 94). Shared suffering is all that Jimmy can offer, and his vision for social change is limited. The ending confirms that Jimmy’s hostile, macho anger is not a model to emulate, but there is the potential for positive

change in feeling, understanding, and vulnerability. *Look Back* as a breakthrough play in the history of British theatre substantiates the notion that institutional change can be brought about through constructive displays of feeling and male vulnerability, a theme that will significantly be taken up by Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and the following chapter.

## Chapter Three: The 90s “Cool” Tabloid Journalist

The critical reception of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* when it first premiered in 1995 at the Royal Court Theatre was uncannily like the reception of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. Perceived as vulgar nonsense, *Blasted* was denigrated as the playwright's puerile attempt to shock theatregoers. Like *Look Back*, the scandal of *Blasted*'s premiere eventually gave way to critical approval and praise of the play as socially and historically important, a recognition that strengthened with Kane's 1999 suicide at age 28 and the attendant mythology of the tortured, tragic artist-visionary who died too young (Sierz, "Political Theatre" 52). Both *Look Back* and *Blasted* depict angry male protagonists negotiating their feelings of rootlessness by obsessing over their (im)potency, making vague political statements, and rejecting political correctness. However, despite the similarities between Jimmy and *Blasted*'s Ian Jones, it is more difficult for audiences to have sympathy for Ian, as he is the ultimate figure of toxic masculinity: violently misogynist, ableist, homophobic, and racist. As a journalist of the lowest kind, a tabloid reporter who writes about sex scandals, Ian does not pretend to be an artist, but is a purveyor of titillation, sensation, and gossip. In contrast to *Portrait*'s Stephen and *Look Back*'s Jimmy, Ian finds no value in his writing: his performance of violent machismo is so destructive that he takes no interest in crafting articles or in portraying truth, and the result is an abhorrent character with little redeeming or sympathetic qualities. However, what is compelling about *Blasted* is that the play continually insists on inviting audiences to sympathize with Ian as a victim of violence, both self-inflicted and as perpetrated by the Soldier, who can be read as an extension of Ian's character. Unlike Stephen and Jimmy, the author's sympathetic treatment of Ian is not related to his "artmaking," or failure thereof. However, the art lies in the structure of Kane's play, where the aggressively experimental form suggests an implicit modernist investment in the idea that art

is socially useful and can accomplish change. The artistry within *Blasted* manifests in Kane's writing and the performance of abject horrors on the stage that provide a foil to Ian's popular tabloid writing. While the ending of *Blasted* is ambiguous, Kane nevertheless emphasizes a vision of hope in Ian's vulnerability and his final line of gratitude to Cate. His vulnerability reveals that his form of violent hypermasculinity is a performative act that functions in warding off what he sees as threats to the self, thus indicating the possibility for positive change in reconsidering performative articulations of masculinity.

Kane's status as a tortured *female* artist is noteworthy. The controversy around the play's premiere as well as the mythology surrounding Kane has influenced much of *Blasted*'s reception up to the present day. *Blasted*, Kane's first play, was undoubtedly judged in terms of the playwright's age and sex. Kane was only 23 years old when it premiered at the Royal Court Theatre, contributing to a celebratory "cult of British youth" and artist-as-celebrity culture that characterized 1990s' "Cool Britannia" with Britpop, the Brit Pack, the Young British Artists, and fashion designers like Alexander McQueen. *Blasted* diverged from expectations of "issued-based women's theatre" like the plays of Sarah Daniels and Timberlake Wertenbaker (Urban, "Commentary" 64). Kane wished to distance herself from feminist theatre tradition and emphasized that she did not want to have her work categorized as being only about gender or sexual politics; however, that is not to say that *Blasted* is apolitical or un-feminist. Furthermore, Kane's concern that her sex might influence how her work was received was well-founded. Reviewers expressed gender biases by accusing Kane of pretension and as suffering a kind of female "hysteria" in writing such shocking and violent theatre, calling *Blasted* a variety of "unleavened, almost puritanical moral outrage" (qtd. in Armstrong 33). Conversely, reviewers also dealt with Kane's youth and gender by according her a status as an "honorary male," as

having a “laddish identity” (Iball 13). One reviewer wrote, ““Kane has proved she can flex her muscles alongside the toughest of men,”” and many “placed *Blasted*’s debut in an unnecessarily gendered parade of ‘great’ male authors: [Edward] Bond, [Bertolt] Brecht, [Howard] Brenton, and [Harold] Pinter” (Armstrong 33). Consequently, Kane came to be seen as a “cool girl” or “bad girl” of British theatre—an “enfant terrible” and “honorary lad” in a boys’ club of culture (Iball 2). It appears that Kane did not do much to contest this perception of herself either, possibly performing a posture of being “not like other girls.” This image of Kane was reinforced with her suicide at the age of 28 and a public fascination with ““the great Romantic legend of the tortured suicidal artist,”” a particularly masculine position with comparisons to figures like Joy Division’s Ian Curtis, one of Kane’s idols (Ravenhill qtd. in Iball 8).

While Osborne’s *Look Back* was, as Alan Sillitoe argued, a ““land-mine,”” metaphorically blowing up British theatre as a historically innovative play, *Blasted* takes this notion a step further by representationally blowing up the stage itself with the bomb blast that occurs at the end of Scene Two (qtd. in Rebellato 9). *Blasted* begins as a social realist play, set in a hotel room in Leeds, but after the explosion, the characters are transplanted to an apocalyptic, nightmarish landscape. The rapid dialogue and succession of events compress time, while the sound of seasonal rain that marks the end of each scene suggests the play’s events take place over a year. Many significant developments occur with each scene, but the stage directions emphasize that everything is “*The same*” (Kane 24). Stage directions that indicate “*The sound of spring [summer, autumn, winter] rain*” are unavailable to a theatre audience, signifying the challenges of staging the play, not to mention the difficulty in staging taboo subject matter like Ian defecating on the stage (Kane 24). The characters are dislocated and isolated: oftentimes they begin stories to cut themselves off, suffering traumatic separation from their memories and

experiences in Pinteresque and Beckettian fashion. The plot is not neatly tied up at the end but is inconclusive, especially in the portrayal of Ian's "death." Kane expressed in several interviews that *Blasted* was influenced by Ibsen in the first section, Brecht the middle, and Beckett the last: her goal was "the detail of Ibsen in terms of situations, combined with Beckett's capacity to go straight to the heart" (qtd. in Urban, "Commentary" 79). Thus, the movement from Ibsen to Brecht to Beckett indicates the play's capacity to be specific and realist while being universal and abstract at the same time; the combination of influences allows *Blasted* to convey social commentary while also expressing existential nihilism. Moreover, the play's move into abstraction, like the shifting formal strategies found in *Portrait* and *Look Back*, indicate a breakdown of the rules of language and law—a gesture of *écriture féminine* that argues for the ambiguity and play of signifiers against the patriarchal control of meaning and for the deconstruction of the ideal-I, or fantasy image of the stable, autonomous self.

Kane employs a form of theatre that Aleks Sierz has coined "In-yer-face theatre," which seeks to confront and provoke audiences at the visceral level (Urban, "Commentary" 68). As a theatrical piece, the physical proximity of the live actors and the audience creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy that employs the audience's shock and outrage to convey an argument. *Blasted's* form manipulates the different meanings of the audience's "sense" of the play, in which "sense" indicates both cognitive meaning and visceral response, where the visceral shock of the audience becomes closely related to their cognitive responses to the play. Especially during the time of the play's premiere, critics and audiences could not agree whether *Blasted* was self-indulgent and gratuitous or deeply moral in its depiction of violence and cruelty (Urban, "Cruel Britannia" 354). At the crux of this question is that the aesthetics of *Blasted*, which "suggest a simulacrum of a microcosm of war," indicate the play's self-consciousness about its

existence as artistic construction (Armstrong 53). *Blasted* engages with social realities in a destabilizing, unusual theatrical form. Reviews such as the famous *Daily Mail* headline proclaiming *Blasted* to be a “disgusting feast of filth” denigrated the play for being excessive while being excessive, exaggerated, performative, and violent themselves (Urban, “Commentary” 65). As Louise Doughty points out, sometimes the violence in *Blasted* is not excessive or exaggerated at all: while the horrors the Soldier describes “may seem over the top to us...a Bosnian refugee might beg to differ” (qtd. in G. Saunders 24). While this is true, *Blasted* is nevertheless excessive and exaggerated in drawing attention to the spectacle of itself as performance. It depicts the performance of abject and grotesque behaviours, such as Ian’s simulated rape of Cate, Cate’s manic laughter and fits, and the Soldier’s “bizarre confluence of cruelty, grief, and revenge” with his rape of Ian (J. Saunders 156). Thinking about performance, especially exaggerated and excessive performance, is useful in examining the tensions that constitute the violence and hypermasculinity depicted in *Blasted*, because as Harry Brod emphasizes, violent men demonstrate not a failure of or deviation from male socialization, but an over-performance (21).

In a theatrical play, the body is the “primary canvas” for “articulating and crossing the limits of discourse” (Wixson 83). *Blasted* emphasizes the pain and mortality of the body as a site of “territorial aggression and defense,” not only in terms of war and rape, but also in terms of abjection and the body’s boundaries and borders (Wixson 82). Ian’s extreme, violent masculinity is a crisis to keep under control that which he sees as threats to his life and subjectivity. Images and instances of bodily abjection abound throughout the play: blood, flesh, feces, urine, semen, vomit, corpses, cannibalism, and rape. Abjection occurs within the narrative of the play as well as the characters’ narratives. The Soldier recounts the horrors he has seen and committed: “Saw

thousands of people packing into trucks like pigs trying to leave town...Crushing each other to death. Insides of people's heads came out of their eyes. Saw a child most of his face blown off, young girl I fucked hand up inside her trying to claw my liquid out, starving man eating his dead wife's leg" (Kane 50). Moreover, *Blasted* employs abjection both on the level of content and on the level of theatrical form and style, "whereby the audience becomes witness to the shattering of the symbolic order and the implications for the subject" (Ablett 67). When the Soldier incites Ian to "[i]magine" the brutality he describes when Ian says he "[c]an't imagine it," the audience is also urged to "[*imagine*] *harder*" (Kane 45). In staging abjection—the taboo, unclean, and improper—Kane invites her audiences to confront the threat of what humanity strives to keep hidden but which continually erupts forth.

As the title "*Blasted*" suggests, the play blasts "settled conceptions about war, society, sexuality and violence"; the word "blasted" itself indicates condemnation (Armstrong 41). Rejecting the assumption that women are not supposed to write violent plays, Kane exposes how the gendered ethos of British national insecurity and ambivalence has destructive consequences for everyone. As Kane explained, in 1993 she was in the process of writing "'a play about two people in a room'" when she saw news coverage on the siege of Srebrenica and made the connection between violence at home and global, political violence: "'one is the seed and the other is the tree. I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peace-time civilisation'" (qtd. in Iball 9). *Blasted* challenges the prevailing perception in 1990s Britain that violence was done to others, by others, elsewhere. In the first drafts of the play, the Soldier had an Eastern European name, Vladek, which would have tied the character to the Bosnian War; however, in the final version, Kane removed all identifiable ethnic designations to detach the Soldier, the war, and the violence from a specific context to universalize the play's themes

(Urban, "Commentary" 86). *Blasted* starts in a Leeds hotel room that "could be anywhere in the world," but the play also refers specifically to a 1990s British context with "Cate's South London accent and love of football, [and] Ian's continued use of racist British slang terms for immigrants" (Kane 3; Urban, "Commentary" 86). As Sierz writes, "[t]abloid prejudices, football-fan attitudes and pub-bore hatreds combine with testosterone to create a convincing picture of bigoted nationalism" (Sierz, "Political Theatre" 51-2). *Blasted*'s confrontation of British domestic politics blasts spatial, as well as emotional and ethical distance in emphasizing violence and antagonism at home.

Like *Look Back*, *Blasted* depicts violence as associated with an intensely defensive and aggressive performance of masculinity that is tied to national and global events. Ian's racism and xenophobia stem from a fear of national impotency that has prevailed in Britain since World War II and the loss of empire, as portrayed in *Look Back*. Ian fears that "England is no longer the England of fantastical memory, pure England that is racially and ethnically homogenous—which of course it never was" (Urban, "Commentary" 99). The irony is that Ian is a Welshman living in England, a fact that produces muddled conversation between Ian and the Soldier about what it means to be English. Welsh-born Ian tells the Soldier he is Welsh, not English, but then claims that "English and Welsh is the same" when the Soldier calls him a foreigner (Kane 41). Ian argues that non-white English people "[c]ome over from God knows where have their kids and call them English they're not English born in England don't make you English," while he claims himself to be "British" and "not an import" (i.e. he is white) (Kane 41). Whether Welsh and English are the same or different depends on what is convenient for and what protects Ian. Moreover, Ian's violent masculinity demonstrates a late twentieth-century fear surrounding the decline of the dominant role of men in the workplace and the family as the result of feminist

movements in the west (Urban, “Commentary” 97). According to Ken Urban, masculinity “policed its boundaries with a renewed vigor in the 1990s,” especially through the rise of lad culture, as a result of a fear of feminization and as a response to the perceived reduction of power (“Commentary” 97-8). At the core of Ian’s performances of toxic masculinity are reactionary attitudes that stem from insecurity. As Judith Saunders contends, Ian’s machismo “camouflag[es] feelings of inadequacy” as the play begins with him performing a series of “compensatory hypermasculine postures”: he undresses, offering Cate the manliness of his body; handles his gun, “signaling his manly ability to both protect and intimidate the weaker sex”; and establishes a racial hierarchy, throwing Cate fifty pence to ““tip that wog [a racial slur for non-whites] when he brings up the sandwiches”” (148-9). Therefore, Ian is all the more dangerous for his anxious masculinity.

With all his masculine bravura, Ian is insecure, fearful, and paranoid from the start. His feelings of insufficient manliness are already evident in his interactions with Cate and only intensify with the entrance of the Soldier. Cate laughs at Ian when he takes off his clothes and asks her to perform fellatio on him, and he “*fumbles with embarrassment*” to put his clothes back on (Kane 8). Similarly, he is “*embarrassed*” when Cate talks about touching herself, as he is flustered about female sexuality independent from men, and from him (Kane 23). He tells Cate he had to stop calling her, because the government had tapped his phone, and he did not want others to hear him being tender with her: “Got angry when you said you loved me, talking soft on the phone, people listening to that” (Kane 29). Although Ian cockily dares Cate to shoot him, he is concerned when Cate actually picks up the gun. She becomes a threat of power against his sexual supremacy as she points the gun at Ian’s groin following his rape of her the previous night, and he “*backs off rapidly*” from holding her to the bed and uses the diminutive “Catie” in

an attempt to placate her (Kane 26). He attempts to have sex with Cate, and after she repeatedly says no and he stops out of fear of bringing on another one of her fits, he suggests she has inflicted injustice on him: “That wasn’t very fair...Leaving me hanging, making a prick of myself” (Kane 14-5). He expresses his ostensible victimization by Cate as a literal and figurative shrivelling of the phallus, suggesting his humiliation from her refusing sex from him. Trying to make Cate feel guilty and explaining that he is pent-up, Ian says, “Don’t give me a hard-on if you’re not going to finish me off. It hurts...Can’t switch it on and off like that. If I don’t come my cock aches” (Kane 15). “*He appears to be in considerable pain,*” but it is unclear if he is faking so that he, “*apparently still in pain,*” can take Cate’s hand in his to give himself a hand job; Ian does, however, come with “*genuine pain*” (Kane 15). The opening scenes establish Ian as a physically and emotionally weak, physically and morally ill, abject individual.

Ian suffers from lung disease and often reiterates that he is afraid of “Death. Not being” (Kane 10). Continually coughing and spitting, Ian abjects himself, “guts sprawling” to protect himself from defilement (Kristeva 3). At the top of Scene Two, the morning after Cate’s rape, Ian is “*overcome with pain*” in his chest and side so “*extreme*” and “*intense*” that he collapses to the floor in a coughing fit: “*It looks very much as if he is dying,*” his organs are “*under attack,*” he makes “*involuntary crying sounds,*” and as the attack subsides, lies in “*a crumpled heap on the floor*” (Kane 24-5). Cate, waking and watching this, calls him a “Cunt,” using a misogynist word referring to female genitalia to call him weak and pathetic (Kane 25). Ian “[l]ocks the door and pockets the key” so that Cate cannot leave, and he tells her to stay because “[she] make[s] [him] feel safe,” to which Cate replies, “Nothing to be scared of” (Kane 28).<sup>5</sup> As a car outside backfires, Ian “*throws himself flat on the floor*” and Cate laughs: he calls her stupid to preserve

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, chapter two of Julia Kristeva’s influential essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror*, is titled, “Something To Be Scared Of.”

his dignity and repeats he is “scared of dying” (Kane 28). Coupled with his illness and fear of death, Ian constantly repeats that he “stinks,” and he asks Cate if the reason she will not perform oral sex on him is his stench (Kane 8). Ian’s desire to be clean and proper requires constant maintenance in the form of frequent bathing, as he attempts to rid himself of the olfactory reminders of decay, vulnerability, and death. His removed lung, a “lump of rotting pork, stank,” indicates his confrontation with his body and its decay, as insides come outside, and part of the subject becomes object: the autonomy of the subject comes into question as it continually requires separation and loss to become clean and proper (Kane 11; Kristeva 108). When Cate suggests that Ian get a transplant, he replies, “Don’t be stupid. They give them to people with a life,” suggesting that he does not have a life, or that he is on the limits of life and death, foreshadowing the ending of the play where he appears to be a talking corpse (Kane 11).

The beginning of the play also establishes Cate as vulnerable and abject to Ian, who both desires and is repelled by her. Twenty-one-year-old Cate is childlike and naïve: she sucks her thumb, stutters when nervous, is unemployed, and lives with her mother. She is prone to fits that have worsened with the return of her father, indicating a history of abuse, but that she will “grow out of,” as the doctor says (Kane 10). Cate comes from a lower-middle-class background, and there are suggestions that Ian and Cate’s relationship started “years ago,” when she was underage (Kane 13). Cate probably has learning difficulties, and Ian continually belittles, manipulates, and exploits her, calling her mentally retarded to bolster his sense of intellectual authority. Because Cate has not slept with her boyfriend Shaun but has slept with Ian, Ian tells her, “You’re more mine than his,” thus claiming continued sexual access to her as his privilege and entitlement (Kane 16). He tells her that Shaun will not have her because Ian has defiled her: Shaun will be able to “[s]mell” that Cate is “[s]oiled goods”: “Don’t want it, not when [he] can have someone

clean” (Kane 52). As Armstrong contends, with Ian’s apparent revulsion of Cate, he finds her, and specifically his dominance over her, as sexually arousing, enacting “literally a sick desire” (67). However, Cate is not completely vulnerable, naïve, and innocent in her relationship with Ian. As outlined above, she is not afraid to laugh at and ridicule him. She enacts revenge on him by ripping the arms off his jacket; flying at him, slapping, kicking, punching, and biting; and threatening to shoot him in the groin (Kane 26). As she performs oral sex on him, she “*bites his penis as hard as she can*” as he reaches orgasm and “*holds on with her teeth*” (Kane 31). The provocative and reactive qualities in Cate’s character indicate that she is a complex, multi-dimensional character and not the archetypal “[s]oft and clean” passive female victim that Ian makes Col out to be (Iball 26; Kane 48). Cate experiences abjection in that she tries to protect herself from defilement, especially from Ian. She does not eat meat (“Dead meat. Blood. Can’t eat an animal”), saying that it will make her “puke all over the place” and “*retch[es]*” over the smell of the meat breakfasts (Kane 7, 35); she wipes her mouth when Ian kisses her and says she does not like when he “put[s his] tongue in” (Kane 12); and she experiences laughing and fainting fits that protect her from threatening situations, fits that she describes as an escape from the world or a temporary death (Kane 10, 22). After biting Ian’s penis, she “*spits frantically, trying to get every trace of him out of her mouth*” and goes to clean her teeth in the bathroom (Kane 31). Cate’s violation by Ian is emphasized as she “*begins to cough and retch. She puts her fingers down her throat and produces a hair. She holds it up and looks at Ian in disgust. She spits,*” and Ian goes to turn on the bathtub taps (Kane 33). Her inability to “piss” or “shit” after her rape because it “hurts” implies the inability to eliminate her defilement (Kane 34).

Cate’s rape between Scenes One and Two is suggested—her “deflowerment” indicated by the “*bouquet of flowers...ripped apart and scattered around the room*”—while Ian’s rape is

staged—graphic and visible as part of the violence of war (Kane 24). The play is split in half with the bomb blast, separating the scenes of private, domestic violence and public, political violence. This division of the play into two halves highlights the similarities between Cate’s rape and Ian’s rape in that they are both violent acts perpetrated by men in the name of masculinity. Whether private or public, committed by an acquaintance or a stranger, committed on a woman or a man, *Blasted* asserts that rape, both at home and at war, is an extreme, violent, and primarily male tactic of obtaining and maintaining dominance and power based in gender politics and gendered power relations: rape is a means of perversely proving, bolstering, and rewarding masculinity. *Blasted* demonstrates that the personal is political and the political is personal, as it reveals the connections between gender, violence, sex, war, and nation. As the Soldier recounts his story of the rape, torture, and murder of a civilian family of eight, he establishes rape as a weapon of war used in asserting dominance over the enemy’s women, and by proxy, the men, as he describes making the male family members watch as he raped the four women and girls (Kane 43). During Ian’s simulated rape of Cate when she is unconscious, Ian points his gun at Cate’s head: the gun represents not only a “phallic symbol of male power, violence, and domination,” but it is doubly violent as a weapon of war (Armstrong 84). The Soldier likewise points the same revolver at Ian’s head when he is raping him, as his sodomy of Ian at gunpoint functions to emasculate him. In its overt and extreme violence, Ian’s rape draws attention to his victimization while serving as a reminder of his private rape of Cate that is rendered invisible, as well as Col’s wartime rape, as his rape is a literal re-enactment of hers. Therefore, *Blasted* suggests that it is not difficult to imagine that the virulent gendered violence and antagonism at home can be magnified to become the hypermasculine violence that is more conspicuous in war.

In the opening scenes, Ian's violent defense of his heterosexual manliness manifests in part in his homophobia. His hatred towards lesbians stems partially from the pain of his wife Stella leaving him after she realized she was gay. As Armstrong argues, lesbianism insults Ian's masculinity as "his emotions of loss calcify into a compensatory politics of blame": that lesbians are sexually indifferent to him "disempowers the primacy of his sexuality and calls it into question by threatening to displace it as the absolute centre of sexual dominance" (67). Not only does "witch" Stella and her "dyke" partner threaten his sexual primacy, but Ian is also upset because he cannot understand how his adult son, Matthew, prefers Stella over him, insinuating his inherent superiority over her because of his heterosexuality: "His mother's a lesbos. Am I not preferable to that?" (Kane 18-9). Comparing female genitalia to an abject wound, Ian asserts that while he loves Cate like he once loved Stella, Cate also has the "potential" for "[s]ucking gash" (Kane 19). He accuses Cate of dressing like a "lesbos," and when Cate asks him what he means, he responds, "Don't look very sexy, that's all," as though women only dress for men, and specifically for him (Kane 7). To Ian's sexist manner of thinking, "a lesbian is any woman... who does not automatically respond to men in the expected, traditional heterosexual manner and, in particular to his sexual advances" (Armstrong 67). When Cate asks Ian if he has ever been with a man, Ian replies, "You think I'm a cocksucker? You've seen me. (*He vaguely indicates his groin.*) How can you think that?" (Kane 19). Of course, this homophobic defense of his heterosexuality makes no sense as Ian suggests that the look of his penis can indicate his sexual orientation, or he perhaps suggests that men who have sex with other men are equivalent to women and do not possess male genitalia. "I don't dress like a cocksucker," he says, again making the illogical suggestion that there is such thing as "homosexual clothing" (Kane 19). Setting up Ian's homophobia in Scene One serves to anticipate Ian's rape by the Soldier as

particularly abhorrent and humiliating for him. It is extremely difficult to find sympathy for Ian when he rants, “Hitler was wrong about the Jews who have they hurt the queers he should have gone for scum them and the wogs and fucking football fans send a bomber over Elland Road finish them off. (*He pours champagne and toasts the idea.*)” (Kane 19). The absurdity and contemptibility of Ian’s statement is underscored by the fact that Hitler’s Nazis indeed persecuted and murdered sexual and racial minorities. Calling for the genocide and extermination of everyone he finds abject, Ian is established as the worst of the worst until the introduction of the Soldier. Ian’s criticism of football fans and hooligans as “tribalism” is unexpected and ironic, considering he engages in his own violent cultural tribalism (Kane 20).

Ian’s racism and xenophobia are tied to fear and loathing of the abject, where racialized bodies demarcate the threat to national and racial purity and the boundaries between Self and Other. Ian’s pathological resentment of people of colour and his repeated use of bigoted language reflect a chauvinism linked to increased immigration to Britain, especially of ex-colonials. He mocks racial minorities, putting on a posture of masculine bravura to hide his fear of the Other who threaten to intrude and pollute his space and dispossess him of his country and social identity: “Hate this city. Stinks. Wogs and Pakis taking over” (Kane 4). In Scenes One and Two, Ian is nervous and suspicious, constantly occupied with checking if his revolver is loaded. He has a fear that somebody is “out there” to persecute him, to exact “[r]evenge,” allegedly for things he has done as a secret service agent (Kane 29). However, Ian also seems to be referring to the non-white hotel bellboy who exists outside of the hotel room, and there is the suggestion that he feels postcolonial guilt and loathing in that he suspects the ex-colonial wants revenge for past imperial sins (J. Saunders 152). The first two times that there is a knock at the door, Ian “starts,” arms himself, shushes Cate, listens at the door, and makes a racist comment to mask his

anxiety with manly bravado: “Probably the wog with the sarnies” or “It’ll only be Sooty after something” (Kane 6, 16). As food and drink materialize at the door, they arrive without the presence of the deliverer. As Paula B. Guerrero and Ana M. Calvo argue, the invisible, silent, labouring people of colour in *Blasted* pose little threat and are “limited to a disclosure of fragility, exploitation, and precariousness” that emphasizes Ian’s irrational fright (5). At the same time, the bellboy is menacing for Ian because he is mute and disembodied: he is an unpredictable and phantasmal representation of a multicultural society that threatens Ian’s sense of power and nation.

Ian considers his chauvinism and insular nationalism as patriotism and devotion for Britain: he explains he became a secret service agent, despite the danger, and did the violent jobs the government asked, “[b]ecause [he] love[s] this land” (Kane 30). Positioning himself as an unrecognized hero, he suggests that the government is trying to kill him now that he has “[s]erved [his] purpose,” and he repeats to Cate, “It’s my job. I love this country. I won’t see it destroyed by slag” (Kane 30, 32). Ian’s panic and frustration with the thought of personal and national impotency and passivity is palpable as he rants, “Can’t always be taking it backing down letting them think they’ve got a right turn the other cheek SHIT some things are worth more than that have to be protected from shite” (Kane 32-3).<sup>6</sup> While the “they” that Ian identifies as antagonists, “[p]lanting bombs and killing little kiddies,” is left ambiguous,<sup>7</sup> he argues for the need to live defensively. The passive construction of his statement, “have to be protected from shite,” indicates governmental betrayal and the failure of the nation to protect its citizens. No

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<sup>6</sup> Notably, words Ian uses to indicate his disgust for everything and everyone abhorrent to him— “Sooty”, “slag”, and “shite”—are also words signifying literal dirt and waste, reinforcing the interconnected implications of abjection in Ian’s attempts at maintaining a sense of purity.

<sup>7</sup> The quote may be referring to Irish Republic Army (IRA) bombings in England, which were happening in the mid-1990s and regularly killing children.

antagonist appears outside the door until the Soldier arrives. As the Soldier and Ian engage in an incongruous game of knocks with Ian armed and listening at the door, Ian, believing the visitor is the bellboy again, unlocks the door with racist bravado: “Speak the Queen’s English fucking nigger” (Kane 36). To his surprise, he opens the door to the white Other, “[s]omeone like [him]” armed with a gun (Kane 29, 36). The Soldier “*pushes the door open and takes Ian’s gun easily*,” effectively emasculating him (Kane 36). The entrance of the Soldier results in the realization of Ian’s worst fears, as the hypermasculine, militant Other intrudes his space to persecute him and expose his insufficient masculinity.

When the Soldier enters the room, he commits a series of aggressive, hypermasculine actions: he seizes Ian’s gun, (a phallic symbol of power;) devours the bacon and sausage breakfasts, (as meat-eating is associated with carnivorous, dominant masculinity;) takes Ian’s keys, wallet, and passport, (to strip him of his freedom and identity;) and stands on the bed to urinate on the pillows, (a male, animal way of claiming territory) (Kane 36-9). After the bomb goes off, the Soldier swallows the last drops of gin, and Ian, finding this humorous, “[*c*]huckles” and comments, “Worse than me,” a statement referring to drinking but also one that anticipates the Soldier’s brutalities (Kane 40). The Soldier mocks Ian by suggesting the latter’s emasculation and effeminacy, using the phallic gun to symbolize his possession of sexual and political power over Ian. The Soldier demands a cigarette, and when Ian asks why, the Soldier asserts, “Cause I’ve got a gun and you haven’t,” and Ian “*considers the logic*” before giving him a cigarette (Kane 40). The Soldier asks if Cate’s panties are Ian’s, and he intimates that the British as a whole are effeminate: “Never met an Englishman with a gun before, most of them don’t know what a gun is” (Kane 37, 40). The Soldier engages Ian in an exchange of stories about violent sexual conquest, to create a male alliance and to initiate a competition of masculine bravado. The

Soldier begins with a story about the rape, torture, and murder of a civilian family of eight and asks Ian if he has ever “done that,” to which Ian replies, “No...I wouldn’t forget...Couldn’t sleep with myself” (Kane 43). When the Soldier presses about Cate, Ian “[d]oesn’t answer,” indicating perhaps shame or remorse for his earlier rape of Cate; he follows with an assertion of moral superiority in an attempt to distance himself from the Soldier: “You did four in one go, I’ve only ever done one” (Kane 43-4). Thus, Kane draws the parallel between Ian and the Soldier’s sexual violence in rupturing Ian’s logic that there is such thing as “degrees” of rape (Armstrong 84).

Kane wants audiences to see the Soldier as the “tree” from Ian’s “seed”—his attitudes towards women, sex, nation, and violence—in that the Soldier is the exaggerated extension of Ian’s character. The Soldier taunts Ian, pushing him to imagine killing a woman when Ian says he has not and could not. The Soldier encourages Ian: “Imagine it...In the line of duty. / For your country. / Wales...Foreign slag...Would you?” (Kane 45). When Ian eventually agrees that he would, “Quickly. Back of the head. Bam,” the Soldier accuses him of posturing (Kane 45). “You never killed anyone,” says the Soldier, which causes Ian to become indignant and defensive—“Fucking have”—in a way that suggests he wants approval from the Soldier at the same time he is repulsed by him (Kane 46). The Soldier mocks Ian as inexperienced and unmanly, and his dialogue resembles childish schoolyard provocation of which Ian takes the bait:

SOLDIER. Couldn’t talk like this. You’d know.

IAN. Know what?

SOLDIER. Exactly. You don’t know.

IAN. Know fucking what?

SOLDIER. Stay in the dark.

IAN. What? Fucking what? What don’t I know? (Kane 46)

As Saunders argues, the Soldier “pricks the bubble of Ian’s bravado by boasting of his own wartime atrocities, the brutality of which effectively crushes Ian’s already fragile masculinity” (J. Saunders 155). When the Soldier asks, “You never fucked a man before you killed him?...Or after?”, Ian produces a defense based in homophobia: “What for, I’m not queer” (Kane 47). Therefore, Kane invites audiences to see Ian and the Soldier as on the same continuum of violence, specifically male-perpetrated violence and aggression against women and feminized Others.

The parallel between Ian and the Soldier is especially evident in Ian’s occupation as a tabloid journalist, in which the stories he writes for the newspaper are comparable to the stories the Soldier tells: sensationalized, but also desensitized, stories about sexual violence against women and children. Ian’s reportage demonstrates the violence in discourse—the violence in the depiction of violence—that is pervasive on a public, institutional, and national scale. Ian’s role as tabloid journalist is very different from Stephen’s and Jimmy’s roles as would-be artists and their aesthetic endeavours in identifying the state of the nation and national art. Unlike Kane herself, undiscerning Ian does not care to be a writer with a vision for truth or for change, but he writes articles that serve only to be provocative and profitable, blurring the lines between journalism and popular mass culture. By making sleazy Ian a tabloid journalist, Kane condemns the state of British popular media and British consumption of media. Ian’s writing is destructive sensationalism pretending to be informational news: he writes stories that titillate readers and sell newspapers, and thus, Kane presents a not-that-exaggerated depiction of tabloid media. In fact, Kane based Ian’s newspaper stories on language and stories found in actual tabloid papers (Aston 15). In an ironic twist, the contemporary media sensationalized the violence of the play in the same manner of reporting that *Blasted* exposes as harmful and parochial: the “kind of

macabre tabloid fascination typical in Ian's reporting" (Wixson 83). This kind of writing serves to keep the play's abjection at a distance, but in contrast, *Blasted* as a work of writing refuses this impulse; as Aston argues, "Kane's image-infused writing aims to make us see and to feel the affects of violence not as a world outside of ourselves, othered and neutralized, but as inside our lives, value systems, choices and behaviours" (19). That is to say, Kane's dramaturgy is an implicit response to the discourse of tabloid journalism, as the play's progressive stages of abstraction and its focus on the connection between language and violence enact an alternative mode of discourse that reveals the moral inequity of and demonstrates an alternative to tabloid journalism. Against the celebration of consumer, commercial culture and national pride of 1990s' "Cool Britannia," *Blasted* presents a riposte to the attitude that culture is a commodity to be managed and marketed. *Blasted* as an example of what critics have called "Cruel Britannia" depicts cruelty and violence in a way that is crucially different to Ian's stories in that it is deeply ethical and implements a form of activism against the very attitudes Ian promotes. Kane's posture is heroic and rebellious: she is the successful artist of the play where there is none in the play itself.

When Ian claims to the Soldier to be himself a soldier "[o]f sorts," he is probably talking about his work as a secret service agent, but he is also talking about his job as a journalist, as this is what the Soldier knows about him, not the fact that he has worked for the government (Kane 40). Thus, Ian aligns his profession in tabloid journalism with militarism and masculine authority, as masculine author. As Graham Saunders argues, Ian fulfills a "self appointed role as arbiter and filter for truth...help[ing] to shape public perceptions on who are to be perceived as heroes and villains in the minds of the British public" (53). Ian certainly invokes the importance of his work, and he seems to think that he and his job are indispensable. When Cate asks how

Ian's colleagues know how to reach him at the hotel, he answers that he told them "[i]n case they needed [him]" (Kane 13). The idea that his profession as sex scandal reporter requires him to be always on call is ridiculous and perverse. In Scene One, Ian's story about Samantha Scrace eroticizes the rape and murder of the British tourist in New Zealand by giving a physical description of the woman as a "bubbly nineteen year old [sic]" and "a beautiful redhead with dreams of becoming a model" (Kane 12). As Seán McCorry contends, "the prurient narration of [Scrace's] death enacts a serial violence upon the murdered woman in a way which is linked to the murderer's 'maniacal' appetite, as Ian and his readers *consume* her story with evident pleasure" (emphasis original) (757). Armstrong argues that "[f]or men such as Ian, she represents the ultimate heterosexual fantasy of the passive female object in her victimhood: beautiful, immobile, inactive (dead)" (81-2). Ian gives a graphic description of the ritualistic killing, paralleling the Soldier's story to come, about the ritualized rape, torture, and murder of Col. The addition of the comment from the Foreign Office spokesman telling tourists that "common sense is the best rule" suggests victim blaming, a common prejudice against victims of sex crimes (Kane 13). Ian's sensationalized story of Scrace's murder presents the "(stereo)types" of the "young and beautiful female victim; the heartbroken mother; and the foreign, murdering maniac": the story is familiar and distant at the same time, as "it is likely to elicit expressions of sympathy, outrage, or horror, but not the feeling of being touched by, or moved by, these violent events" (Aston 15). Ian's speaking out loud the punctuation emphasizes his own detachment from the horrors his article narrates while revealing the tactics of the article's construction. His laughter with his male colleague, their casual, misogynist conversation about one of Ian's sexual partners, and the nonchalant way he calls his colleague a "[t]osser" as he hangs up the phone,

further underscores Ian's detachment from the violence of his news story (Kane 13). Unlike Stephen's and Jimmy's art, there is no personal investment in Ian's writing.

After some time of being unable to speak out loud what happened to Col, the Soldier finally describes to Ian the horrific way she was raped, killed, and mutilated. Ian tells the Soldier he does not want to hear more, and to the Soldier's taunting, he admits he has never seen anything like what the Soldier has described, not even in photos. The Soldier retorts, "Some journalist, that's your job," and as Ian does not understand, the Soldier continues: "Proving it happened. I'm here, got no choice. But you. You should be telling people" (Kane 47). The Soldier wants Ian to tell his story, but Ian tells him, "No one's interested...I write...stories. That's all. Stories. This isn't a story anyone wants to hear" (Kane 47-8). Ian differentiates his "stories" from the Soldier's "story," and he tries to convey this by reading aloud one of his articles to the Soldier: "'Kinky car dealer Richard Morris drove two teenage prostitutes into the country, tied them naked to fences and whipped them with a belt before having sex. Morris, from Sheffield, was jailed three years for unlawful sexual intercourse with one of the girls, aged thirteen'" (Kane 48). The graphic description of the crime—coupled with euphemisms such as "kinky" to imply unusual sexual taste rather than criminal, or "unlawful sexual intercourse" to signify rape—produces a "voyeuristic, illicit, and titillating representation of an erotically violent event for an audience of men like Ian and the Soldier" (Armstrong 82). Ian frames sexual violence as entertainment, and offenders like Morris as harmless, emphasized by the fact that Morris got just three years in prison (Armstrong 82). Therefore, Ian's stories are not so different from the Soldier's stories in that they involve the distanced recounting of sexual violence on women and children as amusement, for the people committing the acts and for the people who hear or read about them.

Through Ian's tabloid journalism, Kane criticizes the prevailing trend of indifference towards international events and global conflicts such as the Bosnian War, in favor of sex scandals that "sell more papers" (Kane qtd. in G. Saunders 28). The suggestion is that the potency and popularity of Ian's type of reporting indicate the media's, and society's, misogynist prejudices and attraction to eroticized violence. Ian states he does not cover international events or "foreign affairs," focusing instead on narrow, national coverage of "[s]hootings and rapes and kids getting fiddled by queer priests and schoolteachers" (Kane 48). He asserts that he is interested in what he calls "personal" stories, not public or political ones, using the word "personal" to mean stories about women and children falling victim to sexual violence as opposed to "soldiers screwing each other for a patch of land" (Kane 48). While Ian tells the Soldier that no one would be interested in a story on him, Ian argues that the violent rape and murder of Col is a worthy story: "Soft and clean. Not you. Filthy, like the wogs" (Kane 48). Kristeva argues that crime is abject "because it draws attention to the fragility of the law," but Ian does not find the crime committed against Col to be abject or dirty (4). Rather, he finds Col's story "[s]oft and clean," indicating that he finds her rape and murder to be "normal" within patriarchal power structures, because of her female sexual vulnerability—an assumption that is also visible in the outrage surrounding *Blasted* that focused on the depiction of *male* rape that is perceived to be more troublesome, perverse, and thus more horrifying (Armstrong 77). Col's story is a worthy story because of its potential for eroticization as Ian's own "personal" violent sexual fantasy, and he even suggests that there is "joy" in her story (Kane 48). Her feminine, "[s]oft and clean" purity would allow him to create a titillating story, as her purity eroticizes sexual violence in that it "demands violation" (Armstrong 83). Therefore, as Aston writes, "Ian is 'bad news'—literally and figuratively": he abuses personally in his treatment of Cate, and

professionally as a purveyor of sensationalist and sexist stories (24). By the end of the play, Ian, broken and emasculated, defecates on the stage and “*tr[ies] to clean it up with newspaper,*” still clinging to the symbolic order and still desperate to ward off abjection (Kane 59). The newspapers, emblematically smeared with shit, fulfill their purpose as garbage.

Despite his efforts to maintain control, Ian becomes powerless as the Soldier “usurps Ian’s position as sexually dominant male” (Armstrong 86). Ian is feminized and emasculated, literally put into the position of Col as the Soldier enacts a perverse, dramatized revenge for her rape and murder by raping Ian. The Soldier performs the role of the man who brutalized Col, while the superimposition of Col onto Ian is emphasized by the Soldier’s gentle kiss, and his comment that Ian “smell[s] like her. Same cigarettes” (Kane 49). The Soldier, with contradictory tenderness, closes his eyes, smells Ian’s hair, and “*cr[ies] his heart out,*” grieving for Col as he rapes Ian (Kane 49). Ian remains silent, in pain, and unable to respond when the Soldier “*pushes the revolver up Ian’s anus*” and says, “Bastard pulled the trigger on Col. What’s it like?” (Kane 49). Using the gun as literal phallus to sodomize Ian, the Soldier threatens Ian’s life while asking if he is experiencing pleasure (Armstrong 86). The Soldier taunts homophobic Ian by asking, “You never fucked by a man before?” (Kane 49). This scene depicts, as Armstrong writes, “male aggression in a fight to the death, not for survival” (86). Yet, in spite of, and because of, the horror of the abuse, the moments of tenderness and vulnerability demonstrated by both the Soldier and Ian indicate their contradictory positions as both perpetrators and victims of violence. The Soldier is a victim by way of Col’s murder, and he expresses vulnerability in expressing to Ian that he wants Ian to tell his story—that he was a well-adjusted, “clean” man before he became a soldier, and that the hypermasculinity necessitated in war made him dirty and repulsive: “At home I’m clean. Like it never happened... You don’t know fuck all about me. / I

went to school. / I made love with Col. / Bastards killed her, now I'm here. / Now I'm here" (Kane 49). Kane presents the Soldier as "'not just a bestial gun-wielder but a man driven to desperate excess'" (Billington qtd. in Iball 25). The Soldier's final act in his re-enactment of Col's murder and his emasculation of Ian is his consumption of Ian's eyeballs. The boundaries of inside/outside that Ian strove to protect from abjection are violated, as his body is invaded by, and then literally subsumed and incorporated into the Other. Eating Ian's eyeballs, the Soldier says, referring to Col's killer: "He ate her eyes. / Poor bastard. / Poor love. / Poor fucking bastard" (Kane 50). The Soldier expresses grief and pity for both Col and her killer, suggesting that they both suffered, just as the play demonstrates that he and Ian have also suffered as the result of gendered violence even when they are perpetrating it. Many critics see Ian's rape by the Soldier as karmic retribution for his rape on Cate, and as the Soldier is the exaggerated extension of Ian's character, his doppelganger, Ian literally and figuratively "fucks himself" because of his violent actions. In this scene of Ian's rape and blinding, where Ian is so abused and reduced, the audience cannot help but to feel sympathy, or at least pity, for him as a victim of violence. The Soldier's suicide between Scenes Three and Four, and Ian's feebleness in Scenes Four and Five demonstrate that such violent behaviour as demanded by constructions of hypermasculinity necessarily leads to self-destruction.

In Scene Four, Cate returns, carrying a baby that a woman has given her to look after. Ian is scared and helpless, asking Cate to touch him and comfort him, and requesting that she tell Matthew something that he does not know or cannot articulate (Kane 51). Cate is much more confident and sure of herself compared to the beginning of the play, taking charge and firmly saying no to Ian's requests as she prioritizes taking care of the baby. Ian is calmer and comforted as Cate sits to stay with him, asking her with a suggestion of guilt, "Not bad as all that, am I?"

(Kane 54). As Ian asks Cate for the gun to kill himself, she “performs the final act of Ian’s disempowerment” by removing the bullets from the gun— “the seed from the phallus”—so that Ian does not have control over even his own death (Armstrong 89). Ian reaches a point of nihilistic despair, and when Cate tells him that “God wouldn’t like it” if he killed himself, he states, “No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing” (Kane 55). The “witty momentum” and use of anaphora with the repetition of “no” indicates exaggeration and excess as Ian compares religion to childish fantasy (Iball 42). Ian’s nihilistic pronouncement has similarities to Jimmy’s “good, brave causes” speech in its theatricality: “If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won’t be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It’ll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus” (Osborne 83). As the world “doesn’t make sense” regardless of whether there is a God, Ian does not want to feel, to live anymore. In fact, after the horrors Ian has been subjected to, it would be “better” to believe there is no God responsible (Kane 55). Moreover, as the play refers to the Bosnian War, where religion was used to justify exploitation and violence, the argument that the existence of God makes the world “better” also “doesn’t make sense.” When Ian finds he is unable to shoot himself and die with some dignity, Cate, fully aware that she gave him an empty gun, declares that she was right: “Fate, see. You’re not meant to do it” (Kane 57). However, despite Ian’s defeat and her empowerment, Cate is not triumphant at the end of the play. Having buried the baby who died in her arms, Cate prays for the infant girl who died “[i]nnocent,” in contrast to herself who can never return to a state of innocence: “Don’t feel no pain or know nothing you shouldn’t know...Don’t see bad things or go bad places...Or meet anyone who’ll do bad things” (Kane 57-8). Ian wants Cate to pray for him, despite his disbelief in religion, and asks Cate for forgiveness as he again expresses guilt for his treatment of her

(Kane 58). Ian is disturbed and concerned for Cate as she leaves to prostitute herself for food, although he has raped her himself. She becomes not only a victim of private rape, but also a victim of forced prostitution in wartime, in which she must exchange sex for food in order to survive.

When Cate leaves, Ian “experiences a psychological crisis exemplified through bodily horror” as he completely regresses from the symbolic order into the semiotic (Ablett 69). The sequence expresses the body’s abjection in its spillage and appetites, as “Ian’s derangement assumes demonic performative proportions” (J. Saunders 159). To accelerated time and alternating blackouts and spotlighting to produce the effect of photographic tableaux or vignettes, the audience watches Ian “*masturbating...strangling himself with his bare hands...shitting...laughing hysterically...having a nightmare...crying, huge bloody tears...hugging the Soldier’s body for comfort...[and] lying very still, weak with hunger*” (Armstrong 61; Kane 59-60). Finally, he exhumes the baby, eats it, puts the remains back in the hole, then “*climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor*” (Kane 60). The element of Beckettian tragicomedy is emphasized as Ian “*dies with relief,*” but as it “*starts to rain on him, coming through the roof,*” Ian, apparently still conscious, comically utters, “Shit” (Kane 60). Ian falls beyond the limits of living, and as a corpse becomes “the utmost of abjection” as “death infect[s] life” (Kristeva 4). His previous, dismissive comments such as, “I’ve shat in better places” and “[Babies] shit and cry. Hopeless,” ironically come true for him, as he literally takes the place of the dead baby (Kane 3, 52). There is no real closure at the end of *Blasted*—no redemption for Ian and no justice for Cate—but there is a suggestion of hope despite the desperate circumstances. Cate, raped by soldiers, returns to Ian to share the food she has obtained in an act of self-sacrificing generosity. The violence, loneliness, and loss that defined the play

become complicated by Cate's act of compassion, and the last line of the play is Ian's expression of gratitude: "Thank you" (Kane 61). The care that is demonstrated in this ending suggests a shift in the cycle of violence that comes from vulnerability.

Abjection and performativity reveal the frailty of the body, of the symbolic order, and of language that Ian fought to evade, envisioning himself to be a perfect, independent subject. The play further reinforces this notion with its form, as the breaking apart of the symbolic order is demonstrated in the progressive theatrical abstraction that acts to deconstruct the subject and achieve an aesthetics of ethics inaccessible to the prevailing forms of popular media and culture in 1990s Britain. *Blasted* presents the possibility of goodness out of catastrophe and dignity out of debasement: at his most brutalised, Ian becomes his most human (Iball 47). Ian paradoxically has more dignity in this final scene than he has had throughout the play, because he is vulnerable and has dropped his defenses. As with Jimmy and Alison at the end of *Look Back*, the pain and trauma of Ian and Cate remain at the end of *Blasted*, but both have matured. Ian demonstrates the strength of vulnerability, as does Cate, who presents a vision of hope in demonstrating for Ian the agency in vulnerability, dismantling his assumptions of what it means to have power. Ian's efforts to convince himself and others of his virility is revealed to be an act to mask his fear of emasculation, directed at the wrong people and expressed in harmful ways. The violence he commits in the name of masculinity inhibits him, and everyone around him, from being clean, safe, and understood. He realizes an alternative masculinity in turning to what is uncomfortable and dirty, in confronting crisis, rather than relying on gendered hierarchies, entitlement, and abuse to control his parochial understanding of his identity.

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